

SHAINOOL JIWA

THE FATIMIDS

1. THE RISE OF A MUSLIM EMPIRE

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Shainool Jiwa

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Figure 1. Map of the Fatimid Empire at its Height

Introduction

As the future draws ever closer – with speedy travel, immediate communication and almost-instant trade – the historical past can seem more remote, like another world, rapidly receding. And whilst we may be increasingly aware of cultures other than our own, the genuine understanding that allows us to connect through what we share, and also to respect our differences, does not always come naturally. But at a time when misunderstanding can easily escalate, it is vitally important that we seize opportunities to learn – both from our global neighbours and from our collective past.

If we consider an age of unexpectedly changing political landscapes, with regions of cosmopolitanism alongside those of parochialism, when developments bring a better quality of life to many, yet the world remains vulnerable to serious threats such as disease, poverty, changing climate, violence and oppression, we might well recognise this as our own age. It is equally true of the 10th century, on which this book focuses. The centuries surrounding the second millennium saw enormous dynamism on the global stage. Influential rules such as those of the great Maya civilisation of meso-america and the prosperous Tang dynasty in China were on the decline, while Vikings rampaged across north-western Europe, and the Byzantine Empire entered its

second-wave of expansion. Muslim civilisation was thriving, with the establishment of no fewer than three Islamic caliphates.

Emerging from the vibrant 10th-century world of the Mediterranean, the Fatimids, a Shi'i Ismaili dynasty, reigned over a diverse religious and ethnic populace for over two-and-a-half centuries (909–1171). At its height, the Fatimid Empire stretched from the North African shores of the Atlantic to the eastern Mediterranean and the Red Sea coast, also including the holy cities of Mecca and Medina (see Figure 1). The authority of its Imam-caliphs was recognised as far afield as present-day Iran, Central Asia, Yemen and India. Fatimid rule represented the earliest sustained Shi'i caliphate of the medieval Muslim world and was a time of great flourishing. The challenges and achievements of the Fatimids are of continued interest today.

In establishing their rule along the southern coast of Mediterranean Sea, the Fatimids were stepping into a millennial-rich history of settlement. They became heirs to ancient civilisations such as that of the Phoenicians, who had founded the renowned city of Carthage, and in the vicinity of which the Fatimids built their first capital city. By the 10th century, the Mediterranean region was entering a period of reinvigoration, catalysed by the wane of Abbasid control. Since 762, the Abbasids had enjoyed immense success from their cultural centre at Baghdad; but whilst the city was not to be sacked by the Mongols until 1258, the siege of Baghdad in 865 weakened Abbasid power considerably. The consequent shift of international trade westwards from Iraq and Syria to Egypt and Ifriqiya renewed ancient trade routes and stimulated the migration and resettlement of large

numbers of people, many of whom were merchants, artisans and scholars. This, in turn, sparked a renaissance along these trade routes over the next century.

The Fatimid era saw a major consolidation of Ismaili thought and literature, a legacy which was continued by successive Ismaili communities in Iran, Syria, Yemen and India. Today, these communities, which trace the lineage of their Imams to the Fatimids, are settled across the Muslim world as well as in Western countries. The story of the Fatimids is also the heritage of these living Ismaili communities.

The study of the Fatimid period has advanced significantly in recent decades with the discovery of a range of textual, material and literary sources from within the Ismaili tradition, alongside increased scholarship on Ifriqiyān and Egyptian historiography. While certain works survive in their original form, many others have been preserved as excerpts or quotations in the writings of later historians. The destruction of the renowned Fatimid libraries of Cairo in the declining years of the dynasty and in Ayyubid times (1171–1260), leading to the loss of a vast number of their works, meant that often the story of the Fatimids was recorded by those ideologically opposed to them.

As the first Shi'i dynasty whose rule of Muslim lands lasted over two centuries, the Fatimids were recurrently presented in a negative light in Abbasid historiography, which became the dominant record of Muslim history. During the 20th century, however, a more informed picture began to emerge. Sifting through these accounts, separating fact from legend, and analysing the rich variety of materials has occupied a number of modern scholars in both the East and the West. On the basis of

their scholarship, and relying whenever possible on first-hand accounts, this book, along with its successor, aims to relate the story of the Fatimid age. This first volume gives an account of the initial four Imam-caliphs, from their inception in North Africa in 909 through to the establishment of their authority in Egypt in 969 (see Figure 2). The second book, *The Fatimid Rule from Egypt*, surveys the reign of the latter ten Imam-caliphs, charting the two centuries of their peak and eventual decline (969–1171).

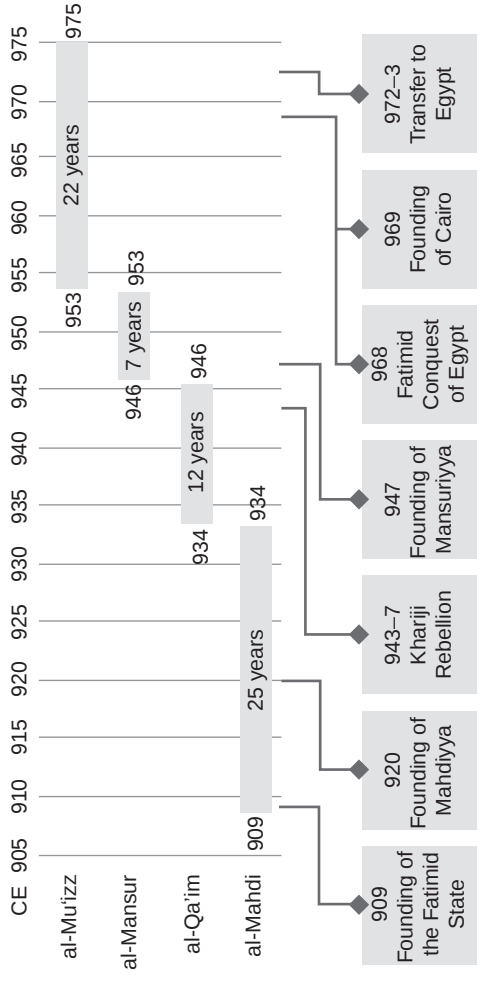


Figure 2. Timeline of the Fatimid Imam-caliphs in Ifriqiya

Chapter 1

The Origins

When the Prophet Muhammad died in the year 632, questions surfaced that would subsequently shape the communities of the Muslim world: Who was to inherit authority over the Muslim community (*umma*), who would now stand as its religious and moral guide, its political leader? Who was to be the arbiter of law and doctrine, now that the Prophet was physically no more? How was salvation to be realised now that the living guide on God's path had passed away? The myriad questions that the earliest Muslims faced when the Prophet died were encapsulated in one: who now was the rightful leader, the legitimate *imam* of Muslims?

For some, the answer converged in one person, Ali b. Abi Talib (601–61), the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet. It was recalled that Ali had been brought up by the Prophet himself, was at the Prophet's side from the earliest days of his mission until his final moments on this earth, had been given the Prophet's daughter Fatima in marriage, and had fathered the Prophet's only surviving grandsons. His supporters, who became known as the *Shi'at Ali* (party of Ali), claimed that the Prophet, as ordered by God and therefore through divine designation, had appointed Ali and a chosen line of descendants from Fatima as the Imams of the community. As such, Shi'a still believe that these

Imams from the Household of the Prophet (*ahl al-bayt*) were the only true inheritors of the Prophet's mantle of authority; only they were vested with the means to lead humankind to salvation.

For many others, the choice of succession to the Prophet settled on the four senior companions of the Prophet: Abu Bakr, followed by Umar, Uthman and Ali, who were recognised as the successors or caliphs of the Messenger of God. Over the course of time, those who followed this line of authority evolved into the Sunni branch of Islam, so named for their belief that the Prophet's way of living (*sunna*) was transmitted this way. Ali's caliphate was virulently contested by Mu'awiya, the leading figure of the Umayyad clan, an aristocratic family from Mecca who had opposed the Prophet in the earlier days of his mission, but who ascended to the senior ranks of the Muslim community after his death. The assassination of Ali allowed Mu'awiya to establish the Umayyad caliphate in 661. Their dynasty lasted nearly a century, until it was overthrown in 750 by the Abbasid clan, who also claimed to be Imams belonging to the family of the Prophet.

Over this first century of Islam, monumental transformations had taken place in the lands that were to become the Muslim world. The first believers had by now spread out from Arabia into the lands of Iraq, Iran, Syria, Egypt and Ifriqiya. Across these lands, they built and settled in new towns, rubbing shoulders with the peoples who had lived there for centuries, and inheriting their learning and traditions. These interactions led to new questions: Who could be defined as a Muslim? Was Islam exclusively reserved for Arab tribesmen or open to all converts? What did it actually mean to be a

Muslim? What was the relationship between faith and practice? Did a believer have merely to believe, or did he have to fulfil all the acts and rituals that were increasingly being codified? What determined law and ritual? How was the text of the Qur'an to be understood, and who could interpret it? What was true knowledge, and from whom could it be obtained? Underlying these questions was the ever-present concern of following the true guide to salvation.

Shi'i Beginnings

The Zaydis

The two Sunni caliphates that preceded the Fatimids – that of the Umayyads (661–750) and the Abbasids (750–1258) – both claimed to be the legitimate inheritors and rightful representatives of the Prophet's authority. But throughout those periods, the communities of Shi'a Muslims maintained their belief that the only true heirs to the Prophet's mantle of religious and temporal authority remained the lineal descendants of the Prophet through his daughter, Fatima, and Ali. In time, the Shi'a also divided over who amongst the progeny of Ali and Fatima were the true Imams. Zayd b. Ali (d. 740), a great-great-grandson of the Prophet and the eponymous founder of the Zaydi branch of the Shi'a, held that any of the descendants of Ali could become the Imam, so long as they sought justice and publicly declared their claim. But for many of the Shi'a, the imamate followed the lineage of the sons of al-Husayn, son of Ali, as shown in Figure 3.

The Imami Shi'a

Another branch of Shi'a emerged in the middle of the 8th century, as the Umayyad dynasty was disintegrating

and the Abbasid caliphate gained ascendancy. Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (702–65) – the great-grandson of Imam Husayn – around whom the Imami Shi'a clustered, lived in the city of Medina throughout this tumultuous age, devoting his life to outlining the principles of the Shi'i faith based on the teachings of his forefathers. He explained that guidance and salvation were attained through knowledge, learning and the use of the intellect. He taught that supreme knowledge of the right path had been given by God to His creation through His chosen messengers and guides; the seal of the prophets, and therefore the last, was Imam Ja'far's own forefather, the Prophet Muhammad. Thereafter, divine guidance continued with his rightful successor, Ali, and then in a divinely chosen lineage through the sons of his progeny, the Imams from the Household of Muhammad.

It was this knowledge that enabled the Imams of the *ahl al-bayt* to know the truth that underpinned the Qur'an, whose inner meanings are known only to God's chosen guides. Imam Ja'far proclaimed that rightful leadership belonged only to these divinely appointed guides, each of whom named his own successor, just as the Prophet Muhammad had designated Ali as his successor. Political authority, and the caliphate, belonged to them by divine decree. But whether they held political office or not, the legitimacy of the Imams did not alter. After al-Husayn, the imamate passed to Zayn al-Abidin, Ja'far's grandfather, and then to his own father, al-Baqir, before the imamate – the knowledge, the wisdom, the guidance and the rightful authority – came to reside in Imam Ja'far himself. Due to the centrality of the idea of the imamate in their vision of faith, the followers of Imam Ja'far,

in time, would often be referred to as the *Imamiyya* (the Imamis).

The Shi'i Imams and their supporters endured decades of persecution under the reign of the Umayyad caliphs, the latter always in fear of a challenge to their claim to the caliphate. After the Abbasid revolution in 750 that overthrew the Umayyads in Damascus, the descendants of Ali and their followers suffered a new wave of persecution under the Abbasid caliphs, with their new capital city at Baghdad. The Abbasids asserted that, as the descendants of the Prophet's uncle Abbas, they were part of the Prophet's family, the true *ahl al-bayt*, and to them alone belonged the titles of Imam and caliph; claims by rival Imams from the lineage of Ali and Fatima, who were direct blood descendants of the Prophet, would not be tolerated. Scores of Alids (followers of those descended from Ali and Fatima) were executed by the Abbasids, and many more imprisoned.

The Ismaili Shi'a and the Twelvers

It was during this oppressive climate when agents of the Abbasid caliph pursued the Imami Shi'a that Imam Ja'far Sadiq passed away. His death in 765 led to a major division between the Imamis. There were those who held that Imam Ja'far had pronounced the *nass* (divine designation of succession) upon his eldest son, Isma'il, who, according to some historical reports predeceased his father, whereupon the imamate was passed on to his son, Muhammad b. Isma'il. In history, they came to be known as the Ismaili Shi'a. There were others who contended that the *nass* was professed instead on Imam al-Sadiq's youngest son, Musa. Subsequently,

this latter group came to be known as the Ithna'ashari, or Twelver, Shi'a.

Both these groups of Shi'a met with severe persecution by the Abbasids. Musa al-Kazim, the seventh Imam of the Ithna'ashari Shi'a, was arrested, jailed and then allegedly poisoned on the orders of the Abbasid caliph. Another son of Ja'far fled to Mecca. It was then that the Ismaili Shi'a Imam Muhammad b. Isma'il secretly left Medina, and, evading Abbasid agents, headed eastwards to the region of Khuzistan, which straddles Iraq and Iran.

The Emerging Ismaili *Da'wa*

The 'Concealment'

From around 765, the location and identity of Imam Muhammad b. Isma'il were considered to have been known only to his most trusted associates, who concealed his whereabouts while remaining in contact with him. Following this significant turn of events, the next century and a half (765–909) came to be characterised in Ismaili history as the *dawr al-satr* (period of concealment). It was during this era, when the identities of the Imams remained hidden except from the most trusted of believers, that an organised movement known as the *da'wa* (religio-political mission) gained momentum across the Muslim world. This mission, which promoted the recognition of the hidden Ismaili Imams and secured allegiance for their cause, served as the precursor to the establishment of the Fatimid state.

Salamiyya: The Ismaili Imam's Secret Residence

Salamiyya (see Figure 1) at this time comprised clusters of houses that made up the districts of the town, all

situated around a main road that ran through the centre of the town. The ruins of ancient Christian monasteries nearby testified that it was an old settlement, but the town itself had only recently been resettled in the Abbasid era, by immigrants from near and far. As did many other towns of the time, it featured a governor's mansion, residential districts, teeming marketplaces and, rising above them all, the minarets and walls of the central mosque, which in Salamiyya was built out of the black rock extracted from local lava fields.

In the residential quarters was a mansion whose high walls indicated that it was home to someone of considerable status. The people of Salamiyya knew the owner to be a respected and wealthy merchant from the Hashimi family (the name of the greater clan to which the Prophet Muhammad had belonged), but only a small, trusted group of people across the Muslim world knew his real identity and the purpose his building served. By the end of the 9th century, the mansion had come to function as the secret central headquarters of the Ismaili *da'wa*, and it was home to Imam Abd Allah al-Mahdi. Few living in Salamiyya at the time could have imagined the series of events that over the next decade would propel Abd Allah to become the first Imam-caliph to found an empire that would span the shores of the Mediterranean.

Justice and Righteous Rule

During the *dawr al-satr* that began with the concealment of the Imam Muhammad b. Isma'il in the 8th century, the Ismaili *da'wa* attracted adherents across the Muslim world, particularly in Ifriqiya, Yemen, Iraq, Iran and Sind. It called for the establishment of a reign based on justice and a Shi'i understanding of

righteous rule, one that aimed to end what many had come to regard as the oppressive rule of the Abbasids, and to replace it with the Alid Ismaili Imams at the helm of the Muslim world.

In the early decades of the 9th century, the Ismaili *da'wa* became highly organised and hierarchical. In the climate of fear and persecution, secrecy was paramount. At the head of the organisation was the *hujja*, the 'proof' and 'guarantor' of the Imam himself. Many thought that the *hujja* in those early years was the 'representative' of Muhammad b. Isma'il. Later, in the Fatimid age, *hujjas* were understood to be his sons and successive Imams, whose true identities had remained concealed.

The term *da'i*, which is derived from the same root as *da'wa*, literally means 'inviter' or 'summoner'. The task of the *da'i* was to call people to the recognition of the imamate of Muhammad b. Isma'il, and to teach the doctrines of the *din al-haqq* (the true faith/religion). The *da'is* held that the core of 'the religions of the book' (i.e. Judaism, Christianity and Islam) was the true religion, the *din al-haqq*, a universal and eternal truth. Throughout history, God had sent speaker-prophets (*natiqs*) – Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad – each of whom pronounced laws and ceremonies, rites and regulations, for their own communities. These were seen as the exterior (*zahir*) expressions of the faith. Yet the core of their message and the inner reality of all the scriptures – the Torah, the Bible and the Qur'an – contained the same universal truths.

Adherents of the *da'wa* pronounced the basic Shi'i doctrine of Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq, that alongside each *natiq*, God had decreed a *wasi*, a vicegerent who was to serve as an elucidator of the revelation and to

lead the initiated believers towards its inner truth. Just as the *wasi* of Adam was his son Abel, for Abraham it was his son Isma'il, for Moses it was Aaron, and for Jesus it was Peter, so for Muhammad the *wasi* was Ali b. Abi Talib. Thereafter, the task of explaining the spirit of Islam and the inner truths of the Qur'an was vested in the Imams who came after Ali. Recognition of the Imam was therefore indispensable for anyone who would attain salvation.

As the Ismaili *da'is* spread across the Muslim world, they found an increasingly receptive audience. Towards the latter half of the 9th century, the previously powerful and intellectually vibrant Abbasid state began to unravel. Disaffection plagued their lands; political factionalism encouraged unscrupulous tax collectors exacting unjust taxes to pay for the growing luxuries of the court and the rising stipends of the unruly soldiers. As the infrastructure declined, farmers suffered, trade was stifled and a general breakdown in order led to rebellion and rioting in the cities.

The call for a reign of justice and righteousness led by an Imam from the *ahl al-bayt* found copious respondents in these politically, socially and economically turbulent times. People were drawn to various aspects of the Ismaili cause; the emphasis on seeking knowledge appealed to many amongst the literary classes of Iran and Iraq, whilst the call for justice and good governance drew those who felt slighted by the existing powers, including the Bedouins of the desert and the rural populations of Iraq and North Africa. The *da'wa's* call for the imminent emergence of a long-awaited *mahdi* fell on receptive ears.

Belief in the *mahdi*, literally meaning 'the rightly guided one', formed an integral doctrinal feature of a

number of Muslim communities from the earliest decades of Islam, given support by the *hadiths* ascribed to the Prophet Muhammad which predicted his arrival to 'fill the world with justice just as it was once filled with oppression'. Almost synonymous with the term *al-mahdi* was the term *al-qa'im*, 'the one who rises' to restore justice and righteousness. While there were differences of views amongst Muslim groups regarding the identity of the *mahdi*, the time of his appearance and his role and function in the Muslim community at the time of his manifestation (*zuhur*), there was nonetheless considerable conformity among various groups to the idea that a *mahdi* and a *qa'im* would indeed appear to restore the community of Muhammad to the true path.

Within the Ismaili *da'wa* also there developed different views on the identity of the *mahdi*. For some, the one they were calling *Imam al-Mahdi* was Ja'far al-Sadiq's grandson Muhammad b. Isma'il himself, whom they believed would emerge, having been in concealment for over a century but who was to return as God's appointed saviour. Yet, for others, and for the leaders of the *da'wa* at Salamiyya, the *mahdi* would be the living Imam from the descendants of Muhammad b. Isma'il, and it would not be long before his public emergence would be proclaimed. It was to North Africa that the eyes of many Ismaili faithful turned, in the year 909, for the manifestation of Imam al-Mahdi.

The Ismaili Da'wa in Ifriqiya

The Berber clans of the Kutama tribes lived in the lands of eastern Algeria, an area known today as the lesser Kabylia, a highland region of mountains, deep valleys, thick forests and flowing streams. Around 893, almost

20 years before the arrival of Imam Abd Allah al-Mahdi in North Africa, a group of Kutama pilgrims went to Mecca. There, they met an Ismaili *da'i* and set out upon a mission that was soon to change the face of the Muslim world.

Just outside Mecca, the Kutama tribesmen would sit around their campfires discussing the merits of Ali b. Abi Talib. There, they met Abu Abd Allah al-Shi'i, an Ismaili *da'i* originally from Kufa, in Iraq. He had travelled to Yemen, where he studied under the great Ismaili *da'i* and scholar Ibn Hawshab, the chief *da'i* in Yemen. The erudition of Abu Abd Allah impressed the Kutama pilgrims. Convinced of his piety, they entreated the *da'i* to accompany them to their homeland to serve as a teacher to their people.

Soon after the year 893, Abu Abd Allah arrived in the lands of the Kutama. There, he held his first *majlis al-hikma* (session of wisdom). During his own years of training in the *da'wa*, he would have learnt both to speak eloquently and to listen patiently, posing questions to his students, responding to their queries and assuaging doubts. In his first *majlis*, the *da'i* spoke to his congregation about 'the distinct virtues of Ali b. Abi Talib' (Al-Nu'man, *Founding...*, p. 56). Over the following *majalis*, he continued by relaying the central tenets of the Shi'i faith. 'People came to visit him from every region', Qadi al-Nu'man writes in his history, and the *majalis* audiences began to increase. Over time, the Kutama learnt the principles of the Ismaili faith, the necessity of allegiance to the chosen Imam from the *ahl al-bayt*, and the mission of establishing a state from where he could introduce a reign of just governance and righteousness, the *dawlat al-haqq* (the righteous state).

Years passed, and Abu Abd Allah al-Shi'i continued his sessions of teaching. In time, as their own knowledge and expertise increased, many Kutama themselves became *da'is*. A community of believers coalesced around the chief *da'i*, and from 893 to 902 they embarked together on building their own haven at Ikjan in the Kabylia mountains. Once a fortress had been built for the defence of the town, many Kutama families began to settle at Ikjan. Markets, warehouses, bathhouses and caravanserais soon sprang up as the town took shape. For the faithful, Ikjan was their *dar al-hijra*, an abode of emigration, where they could bring into existence the *dawlat al-haqq*, the righteous state based on the principles of the true religion, the *din al-haqq*. When the supporters of the *da'wa* relocated to Ikjan, they sought to emulate the example of the Prophet Muhammad, whose own *hijra*, or emigration from Mecca to Medina, marked the foundation of a new community of Muslims. If Medina was the first *dar al-hijra*, then Ikjan was for the Kutama the most recent, a community founded in the name of the one whom they considered the righteous Imam descended from the Prophet.

But events in the Kutama lands did not go unnoticed. North Africa was then ruled by the Aghlabid dynasty, local governors who ruled under the patronage of the Abbasid caliphs. Fearful of the new community's expansion within their borders, from 902 onwards, the Aghlabids repeatedly sent forces to curb the growing power and influence of the Kutama. However, what had begun as a movement of just a few handfuls of families had already grown into a powerful force, extending its reach closer and closer to Qayrawan (see Figure 1), the capital of the Aghlabids.

Hotbed of Debate

As these events played out in Qayrawan, there lived a young man in his early twenties. Ja'far b. Ahmad, known as Ibn al-Haytham (not to be confused with his namesake, the near-contemporary scientist known in the West as Alhazen, who subsequently became influential at the Fatimid court in Cairo), would come to play a prominent role in the Ismaili *da'wa*. His work *Kitab al-Munazarat* ('The Book of Disputations') is one of our key surviving sources on the earliest years of Fatimid rule in North Africa; it provides an eyewitness account of the debates that took place between the leading Ismaili and Sunni scholars in this early period. *Munazara* was the name given to the popular form of public debates that were held in the Muslim world during this period, and Ibn al-Haytham's own work was representative of this literary genre.

Ibn al-Haytham was probably born into a Zaydi Shi'i family, and under the tutelage of his father he studied the Qur'an, the intricacies of Arabic and the arts of disputation and legal reasoning, before moving on to Greek philosophy and logic. However, in contrast to his wide-ranging education, the ideological climate at Qayrawan was dominated by Sunni scholars from the Maliki tradition. Qayrawan had long been a major centre of Sunni scholars belonging to the Maliki school of law (*madhhab*), named after their eponymous founder Malik b. Anas (d. 795), a seminal figure of early Islamic law. Some of the most famous Maliki scholars had lived in the city and contributed to their *madhhab*'s spread across North Africa. Qayrawan was also a hub for the Sunni Hanafi *madhhab*, the school of law attributed to Abu Hanifa (d. 767) in Iraq, which had been promoted by the Aghlabids. There was

also a small community of Shi'a to which Ibn al-Haytham belonged.

The Malikis' dominance in the city, and their influence across North Africa (which remains to this day), meant that Ibn al-Haytham would have had sparse access to materials on Shi'i history and thought, since the possession of Shi'i material was deemed dangerous. It was only when a trusted Shi'i scholar arrived from Sicily that he could attend sessions on the doctrines and beliefs of the Shi'a. But in 909, Ibn al-Haytham witnessed the arrival of Kutama armies in Qayrawan, and soon he too gave the oath of allegiance to enter into the Ismaili *da'wa*. Thereafter, he set out on the path to a long and distinguished career as a scholar and writer in the service of the Fatimid Imam-caliphs.

Following the Kutama entry into Qayrawan, public debates were held between the leading Ismaili *da'is* and the foremost scholars of the city's Maliki Sunni community. Among the themes that Ibn al-Haytham notes as subjects of debate were the principles of the imamate, the nature and scope of guidance in the Muslim community, the stature and virtues of Ali b. Abi Talib and questions related to the interpretation of the Qur'an, as well as some issues of Greek philosophy. He also observes the etiquette with which the debates were held, with the *da'is* promising security to their opponents, despite the opposition of their claims.

Over the preceding years, it was noticed that some among the Kutama would occasionally disappear out of sight. Al-Nu'man notes: 'None of them would know where he had gone. He would be lost to their view until his return.' These were the confidential messengers of the *da'wa* whose role was to deliver messages and tributes

to the headquarters in Salamiyya. When they returned, they brought with them messages and instructions for the chief *da'i*. Al-Nu'man provides a vivid description of their role:

Whenever Abu Abd Allah [al-Shi'i] chose someone for this task and had confided about it to him, he would not inform anyone of his family or children about it. ... They would travel under cover in the condition of the poor and the pilgrims of the remote regions of the Maghrib [North Africa], in rags and worn out clothes, until they had delivered to the Imam what was sent with them. Then they would return in the same manner.¹

According to Fatimid writers, throughout the course of the *dawr al-satr* the Ismaili Imams in concealment often adopted epithets such as *al-Mubarak* ('the Blessed') and *al-Maymun* ('the Auspicious') by which to conceal their true identity. But at the turn of the new century, as the *da'wa* in North Africa first set root, the name and identity of the new Imam was gradually revealed. In 899 in Salamiyya, Abd Allah al-Mahdi was 25 years old when he was pronounced Imam by his predecessor. Within a decade, the *da'wa* would announce his identity as the *mahdi* whose emergence they had long awaited.

While many in the Ismaili *da'wa* hastened to pledge their allegiance publicly to Abd Allah as the Imam, others questioned the authenticity of his claim. Among these were the *da'is* in Iraq, notably Hamdan Qarmat and his brother-in-law Abdan, who refused to recognise the authority of the Imam at Salamiyya, holding that the true *mahdi* was in fact Muhammad b. Isma'il, who had

gone into concealment around 765 and was expected to reappear at the prescribed time.

Contestations regarding the identity of the *mahdi* led to a schism in the Ismaili *da'wa*. Those who opposed Abd Allah as the Imam came to be known as the Qaramita, after their leading *da'i*, Hamdan Qarmat. In Iran, Bahrain and Yemen, there was a similar split among the *da'is*, with some supporting Abd Allah, while others vehemently opposed him. For decades thereafter, the Qaramita became among the most intractable foes of the Fatimids. Meanwhile, events in Salamiyya took their own turn, instigated by a *da'i* whose zealousness in declaring the identity of the Ismaili Imam had led to the Abbasid caliphs of Baghdad gaining knowledge of Abd Allah's whereabouts.

As a result of this disclosure, when Abbasid agents hastened to Salamiyya to arrest the Ismaili Imam, Abd Allah was compelled to leave the city under the cover of darkness, accompanied only by his young son Abu'l-Qasim (the future Imam al-Qa'im) and a couple of trusted servants. They would spend the next seven years in perilous travels. From Syria they moved to Palestine, protected there by a Turkish governor who had secretly joined the *da'wa*. But soon they had to continue their journey. At each stage, news from the *da'wa* network kept them informed about the movement of Abbasid agents, who remained hot on their heels. From Palestine they travelled to Egypt. There, Ja'far al-Hajib, a devoted servant of the Imam and the author of the *Sirat Ja'far al-Hajib*, was arrested when the governor of Egypt became suspicious of the travelling party. Under torture, Ja'far was questioned about the identity of his master, but refused to divulge his true identity. Soon thereafter,

the Imam and his companions left Egypt, and headed to the lands of the Maghrib, or present-day Morocco.

In 905, they arrived in Sijilmasa, a flourishing trade centre, and there the Imam set up home. Over this time, the Imam kept in contact with his leading *da'i* Abu 'Abd Allah al-Shi'i. But four years later, just as the armies of the Kutama were on the verge of taking Qayrawan, he and his companions were placed under arrest when the Aghlabids became aware of the Ismaili Imam's location. Events in Ifriqiya, however, quickly changed course again. In 909, the Kutama armies entered Qayrawan, and hearing reports of the Imam's arrest in Sijilmasa, rode towards the city to defeat his adversaries. After reaching Sijilmasa, the Kutama under Abu 'Abd Allah al-Shi'i secured the release of the Imam and accompanied him to Ifriqiya, where they bore witness to the birth of the Fatimid state.

The 'Shi'i Century'

The quest for the righteous rule of the *ahl al-bayt* had by now already found expression in North Africa with the establishment of the Idrisid dynasty in the 8th century in regions of present-day Morocco. But the decline of the Abbasids facilitated the rise of a number of Shi'i dynasties across the Muslim world, such that the 10th century has often been referred to as 'the century of Shi'a Islam'. Among these were the Zaydi Shi'i states in Yemen and the Caspian region, in present-day northern Iran. In northern Iraq and Syria, the Hamdanid dynasty (905–1004) established semi-independent rule and gained renown for its patronage of art and culture. Similarly, the Buyids (934–1055) were among the Shi'a who originated from the Caspian region and who established

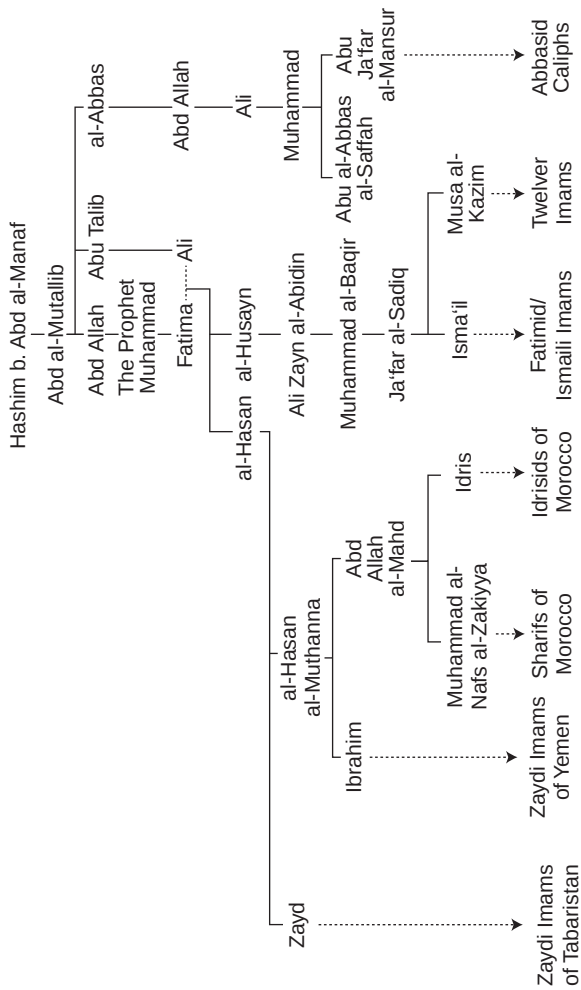


Figure 3. Imams and Caliphs from the Clan of Prophet (the Banu Hashim)

their sway over the Abbasid lands by 945; they promoted public commemorations of Shi'i festivals and patronised the doctrinal formulations of Ithna'ashari (Twelver) Shi'i belief following the occultation (*ghayba*) of their twelfth Imam in the first decades of the 10th century. The Caspian was also one of the regions where the Ismaili mission flourished during the period preceding the rise of the Fatimids, as well as being the locus where *da'i* Hasan-i Sabbah was subsequently to establish Nizari Ismaili rule in 1090, with its headquarters at Alamut.

The Dawn of an Ismaili Age

In August of 909, almost three centuries after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, a band of followers of his descendent Shi'i Ismaili Imams gathered on horseback just outside the city of Sijilmasa (see Figure 1), a flourishing trade centre at the edge of the Sahara desert. The glowing late-summer sun lighting their dust-etched faces, the Kutama Berbers had galloped for over a fortnight through desolate desert tracks and precarious mountain passes, anxious to arrive before it was too late. Now, with their gaze transfixed upon the city gates, they waited for the *zuhur*, the public manifestation of their Imam. Across the Muslim world, many of their fellow believers were also awaiting this day. Over the next few days and weeks, they would witness the birth of the Fatimid state.

* * *

The shuffling sounds of tethered horses merged with the softly whispered prayers by the city gates as trepidation mingled with elation. Some 20 years had passed since

the Kutama tribes of Ifriqiya had first rallied to the Ismaili Imam's cause. Over that time they had mobilised under their leader in the region, the *da'i* Abu Abd Allah al-Shi'i, who summoned them to establish a state for the hidden Imam. Just under a year earlier, they had taken Qayrawan. But now word had reached the Kutama that the identity of the hidden Imam, to whose cause they were committed, had been discovered by the local rulers of Sijilmasa, and his life was in danger. Almost immediately, they set out from Qayrawan on a 1,000-kilometre journey to reach their Imam. The moments that followed would be remembered and retold for many years to come.

On 26 August, outside the walls of Sijilmasa, the Imam emerged. He was riding a bay horse and wearing a turban whose cloth trailed over his neck and shoulders, an Egyptian linen shirt and sandals. The Imam Abd Allah, soon to be known by his regnal title, al-Mahdi bi'llah, was 35 years old. Just then, a voice rang out over the crowds of the Kutama tribesmen: 'O faithful! This is my lord (*mawla*) and yours, and the lord of all mankind!'²

When the Kutama saw their chief, Abu Abd Allah al-Shi'i, dismount from his horse, they followed suit. Al-Shi'i rushed towards the Imam, falling to his knees to kiss the stirrup of the Imam's horse, tears streaming down his face as he wept with joy. Then, he heard the first of Abd Allah al-Mahdi's words, 'Rejoice in the glad-tidings'.³

The following morning, outside the city of Sijilmasa, Imam al-Mahdi sat in a large open tent. On his right stood his 15-year-old son, Abu'l-Qasim Muhammad, who had been arrested alongside his father and who had also

been rescued from the city the night before. Beside them were the loyal companions and servants of the Imam, some of whom had been by his side for the past decade, having accompanied the Imam throughout his arduous journey westwards from their home in Syria, across Egypt and the Sahara, culminating in their arrival at this remote outpost in north-west Africa.

Outside al-Mahdi's tent, the Kutama Berbers were arranged in their rank and file under the command of their chiefs, all taking turns to greet and pledge allegiance to their Imam. For 40 days, al-Mahdi and his followers remained in Sijilmasa. Then they set out, riding along the eastern road towards the shores of the Mediterranean Sea, to where the foundations of the Fatimid state were to be laid.

Just over halfway along their journey, the travelling party passed through a place that held special significance for the Kutama Berbers. As the Imam and his companions wound their way through the rugged Kutama highlands, they approached the town of Ikjan. Celebrations sprang up in the streets. The Kutama had themselves built the town some ten years previously as a haven for the community of believers. Since it was first built, many families and clans had moved to this *dar al-hijra*, their 'abode of emigration', as the *da'i* al-Shi'i had named it, rekindling the memory of the Prophet Muhammad's *hijra*, to live and work together for their cause.

Imam al-Mahdi remained at Ikjan for a short while before he and his party set out on the final stage of their journey. Their number swelled with a group of Kutama from Ikjan who had decided to follow the Imam. Together, they headed east towards Qayrawan,

where they would hear the first public proclamation of the founding of the Fatimid state.

With its bustling markets and towering minarets, Qayrawan was then the greatest city in Ifriqiya. For centuries, it had functioned as the seat of power for previous Muslim dynasties. But in 909, the city had fallen to the Kutama, who had compelled the Aghlabid governor to flee to the east, nine months before Imam al-Mahdi's first appearance, at Sijilmasa. Now, the city prepared to welcome the Ismaili Imam. On Thursday 4 January 910, al-Mahdi and his entourage arrived in the city. An eyewitness account provides a vivid description:

The inhabitants of Qayrawan received him in their multitude. Among them were elders, notables and jurists ... Al-Mahdi approached, leading the supporters of his realm and multitudes of troops of his followers ... Al-Qa'im [his son] followed behind him, while the cortege and the troops marched along the length and breadth of the plain of Qayrawan. The jurists of Qayrawan greeted [al-Mahdi] as caliph and imam. They congratulated him on his victory and safety. He reciprocated towards them kindly.⁴

The following day, the people of Qayrawan gathered in the congregational mosque for the Friday prayer. There they heard a sermon (*khutba*) unlike any other previously heard in the mosque. For as long as the congregants could remember, the Abbasid caliphs of Baghdad had been proclaimed as the only legitimate rulers over the Muslim world. Now, for the very first time, the *khutba* was pronounced instead in the name of a Shi'i Ismaili Imam:

O Lord, bless your servant and vicegerent (*khalifa*) who presides in Your lands upon the destiny of Your servants, the Servant of God, Abu Muhammad al-Imam al-Mahdi bi'llah, Commander of the Faithful, just as You blessed his ancestors, Your rightly-guided vicegerents.⁵

Soon thereafter, a decree was issued from the pulpits of Qayrawan. It was read out across all the nearby towns, promoting obedience and loyalty to the Imam, as a descendant of the Prophet:

May your adherence to the rope of obedience to him and the bond of loyalty to him become strong, for indeed, no bond connects God and His servants except through their love for the *ahl al-bayt* (the family of the Prophet) ...⁶

The age of the Fatimids had begun.

Our Sources of Evidence

The details of the Kutama's march to Sijilmasa, the emergence of the first Fatimid Ismaili Imam-caliph al-Mahdi and the public proclamation of his caliphate are drawn from eyewitness accounts as reported by Fatimid supporters. Sometimes, it took years for these accounts to be finally committed to text. Among them we find the *Sirat Ja'far al-Hajib*, an account of al-Mahdi's loyal servant and companion, in which Ja'far relates the story of the years before the arrival of al-Mahdi in Sijilmasa and the long and hazardous journey that they endured after setting off from Syria. He describes how he was captured and tortured en route by Abbasid agents, but how eventually he stood triumphantly behind Imam al-Mahdi on



Figure 4. Page from al-Nu'man's *Iftitah al-Da'wa*

A manuscript of Qadi al-Nu'man's *Iftitah al-Da'wa*, dating from the early 20th century. Copies of al-Nu'man's works have been continuously reproduced by Ismailis from the medieval period to the present day.

the day when the Kutama tribesmen pronounced their allegiance to him.

Decades later, another Ismaili scholar, Ahmad b. Ibrahim al-Naysaburi, wrote a work titled *Istitar al-Imam* ('The Concealment of the Imam') in which he, too, relates the accounts of those early years, often based on the testimonies of previous generations.

Also witnessing those earliest decades of the Fatimid state was a young man called Abu Hanifa al-Nu'man. In time, al-Nu'man became the pre-eminent North African scholar and jurist of the Fatimid age, his

stature leading him to be known simply as *al-Qadi*, or 'the Judge'. Having initially embarked on a career as a scribe to Imam al-Mahdi, he was to compose books on a wide range of subjects, from Ismaili law and history to theology and esoteric teachings. Among the most enduring and influential of al-Nu'man's historical works is his *Iftitah al-da'wa wa-ibtida' al-dawla* ('Commencement of the Mission and the Beginnings of the State'), which describes the major events and the figures involved in the lead-up to the foundation of the Fatimid state. Much of what we read above about the Kutama, their journey to Sijilmasa, the release of al-Mahdi, and their return together to Qayrawan, is drawn from this work.

For al-Nu'man, the *Iftitah's* retelling of the foundation of the Fatimid state is, however, only one part of a story whose origins lay centuries in the past. In the opening paragraph of the work, he quotes a verse from the Qur'an where God says to believers, 'My righteous servants shall inherit the Earth' (Q. 21:105). Al-Nu'man and the followers of the Fatimid Imams believed that the foundation of the new state marked the moment when the divine inheritance of the Prophet Muhammad, of his political and religious authority, was finally realised by its rightful owners – his divinely designated descendants through his daughter Fatima. For the Ismaili faithful, like al-Nu'man, the authority and leadership of the Fatimids stemmed from the authority God granted to the cycle of prophets of ages past as recorded in the Qur'an, an authority which then continued from the Prophet Muhammad to Ali b. Abi Talib, and thereafter passed to Ali's descendants from his marriage to Fatima. They upheld



Figure 5. Blue Qur'an Folio

This folio from the famous Blue Qur'an, written in an early form of Kufic script, shows verses 55–60 from Surat al-Furqan. While its specific attribution remains unclear, scholars have long held that this Qur'an was produced in Ifriqiya during the time of the Fatimid Imam-caliphs. The use of gold ink on brilliant indigo coloured vellum has made this 600-page Qur'an unique.

that the same divine designation was inherited by the Ismaili Imams, descendants of Ali and Fatima, the sole continuation of his bloodline, giving rise to the dynastic name of 'the Fatimids' (*al-Fatimiyyun*). Thus, for al-Nu'man, to understand the birth of the Fatimid state, one had to begin with the teachings of al-Mahdi's ancestors leading all the way back to the Prophet of Islam.

Chapter 2

Towards a Mediterranean Empire

The public proclamation of Abd Allah al-Mahdi as the first Fatimid Imam-caliph marked the formal inception of Fatimid rule in North Africa, from where the dynasty would rule for the next 64 years. Al-Mahdi's reign lasted for 25 years, firmly establishing an Ismaili Shi'i Mediterranean empire.

On Friday, 5 January 910, crowds gathered at the mosque of Qayrawan and in the nearby royal city of Raqqada for the first Friday sermon after al-Mahdi's arrival. There they heard al-Mahdi pronounced as the *Amir al-Mu'minin* and the *Imam al-Muslimin*, the 'Commander of the Faithful' and the 'Imam of the Muslims'. Hereafter, he would be referred to by his regnal title *al-Mahdi bi'llah* (the 'One Rightly Guided by God'). The prayer leader of the congregation affirmed the Fatimid mission to restore the righteous rule of the *ahl al-bayt*, making clear their Shi'i beliefs. In the same sermon, prayers were recited for 'Prophet Muhammad and his family, for the Commander of the Faithful, Ali, for al-Hasan and al-Husayn and Fatima the Resplendent [*al-Zahra*], may God's blessing rest upon them all'. The reference to Fatima was particularly significant, as it underlined the Imami Shi'i belief that it was through her and Ali's lineage that the imamate was to continue to the end of time. As the crowds in Qayrawan continued to

listen, they heard the foundational beliefs and principles of the new Shi'i Fatimid caliphate:

O Lord! Bless your servant and vicegerent who presides in Your lands upon the destiny of Your servants, the Servant of God, Abu Muhammad al-Imam al-Mahdi bi'llah, Commander of the Faithful, just as You blessed his ancestors, Your rightly-guided vicegerents led on the right path, who ruled and rendered justice, observing the truth. ... (God), may His praise be exalted and His names sanctified, fulfilled His promise to His Messenger, may God bless him and his progeny, by restoring the inheritance of prophethood and the keys of the Imamate to the family of His Prophet. He honoured religion and the believers, saving them from disaster in every situation with the advent of the Servant of God, Abu Muhammad al-Imam al-Mahdi bi'llah, Commander of the Faithful. ... He [al-Mahdi] is the key of mercy and the guide of the good, defending the truth, protecting religion, taking care of the affairs of Muslims, and watchful of that which thwarts the aspirations of the peddlers of falsehood. ... May your adherence to the rope of obedience to him and the bond of loyalty to him become strong, for indeed, no bond connects God and His servants except through their love for the family of Muhammad, may God bless him and grant him salvation. God, exalted be His mention, has said, *'Say: "No reward do I ask of you for this except the love of those near of kin"'* (26:23). The Messenger of God says, *'My family among you are like Noah's ark. He who sails in it will be safe, but he who holds back from it will drown.'*¹

The Founding of the Fatimid State

By the 10th century, much of the northern shores of the Mediterranean belonged to the Byzantine Empire,

successor to the Roman Empire, which extended from Italy to the borders of Syria, and to the other Christian kingdoms of western Europe. Commercial relations and military rivalries with the Byzantines would become one of the most important features of Fatimid foreign policy.

At the western end of the Mediterranean, the Iberian Peninsula (modern Spain and Portugal) was ruled by a branch of the Umayyad dynasty, with their capital at Cordoba. A century-and-a-half earlier, in 756, the Umayyad prince Abd al-Rahman, having fled the Abbasids, had taken control of the region.

In 910, amid this Mediterranean milieu, with the Byzantines to the north, the Umayyads to the west and the Abbasids to the east, the Imam Abd Allah al-Mahdi began to lay the foundations of the Fatimid administration and the framework for a new Mediterranean empire.

A decade of war and the collapse of the previous Aghlabid regime had left a void in the administration of Ifriqiya. The North African populace at the time was religiously and ethnically diverse. Muslims in the land included Sunnis and Shi'a as well as the Kharijis, about whom we shall read in this chapter. There were also sizeable Christian and Jewish communities. Ethnically, the population was made up of Berbers and Arabs, among whom were farmers, merchants, scholars and artisans. Each group had its own demands and expectations of the new state, and negotiating between them all became the central task of the new government.

When al-Mahdi began to establish his state and to appoint ministers for various government departments, he drew upon officials from various ethnic and religious

groupings. To head the ministry of taxation and the postal and communications ministry (the *barid*), he appointed Ibn al-Qadim, a Sunni administrator who had served competently under the previous Aghlabid administration. Similarly, he chose an administrator from the previous regime as director of the mint (*sikka*), the department responsible for minting coins and ensuring the quality of the currency. For the role of supervisor of the markets, who would be vital in restoring the trust of merchants and rekindling prosperity, al-Mahdi appointed an Ismaili.

Responding to the wave of popular demands for just rule, the new Imam chose to oversee some of the most important offices of justice himself. The *mazalim* courts were an established feature of the 10th-century Muslim world, allowing ordinary subjects to seek redress against abuses of power or oppressive acts (*mazalim*) committed by state officials. They functioned as an appeals court, where decisions made by *qadis* (judges) could be reconsidered, and complaints against a local tax collector, a regional governor, a commander or even the caliph himself could be heard. Previously, the Abbasid caliphs were well known for holding weekly sessions hearing public petitions against acts of injustice. In time, the role became delegated to their ministers and judges. In the new Fatimid state, al-Mahdi chose to make this his own personal responsibility, as Qadi al-Nu'man writes:

He redressed injustices and would hear such cases himself. He accepted written petitions from complainants while riding or sitting. He would hear from them their complaints and would redress their grievances on the basis of justice and equity.²

Ustadh Jawdhar Enters into Fatimid Service

The Saqaliba (or Slavs) were a distinct group of people in North Africa in the 900s. Most of them had been born in the Slavic lands, today's eastern Europe, and brought as slaves to North Africa and Spain. Many would rise to prominence in the Fatimid caliphate, and two in particular achieved unrivalled status in the Fatimid household and state – Ustadh Jawdhar and Qa'id Jawhar al-Siqilli. When the last Aghlabid governor fled eastwards, he left behind in his palace a retinue of over 1,000 of his distant family members, slaves and servants, including a great many Saqaliba.

Jawdhar, who in time would be called *al-Ustadh* (literally, 'the teacher' but used euphemistically of eunuchs) was then still a youth. Decades later, Jawdhar's own servant and scribe would pen his biography, titled *Sirat al-Ustadh Jawdhar*, which provides a unique insight into the functioning of the Fatimid court. It also reveals a snapshot of everyday life in the Fatimid realms. It begins with Jawdhar recalling his earliest memories, when, after the departure of the old governor and the arrival of the new Imam, he stood in the old Aghlabid palace awaiting the arrival of the Fatimid Imam-caliph:

I stood before al-Mahdi together with all the Slavs and others. Al-Mahdi bi'llah apportioned us in the service of his warehouses. Then he looked at me and said, 'This youth is graceful; it may be that there is some goodness in him.'³

In time, Jawdhar became the most senior administrator, and notably the most trusted confidant of the Fatimid Imam-caliphs, recognised for loyalty that was

above all to the Imam-caliph. His position became ever more important in the early decades of Fatimid rule, when different groups began agitating for privileges for themselves.

Rebellion in the Ranks

Few could then have expected that the first challenge to Fatimid power would come from figures within the Ismaili *da'wa*. But the policies of the new government had repercussions, and issues which had been simmering beneath the surface quickly came to the fore.

In the decade preceding 909, the Kutama chieftains, together with the *da'i* Abu Abd Allah al-Shi'i, had been masters of the lands that they had conquered. It was amongst these chieftains especially that in the first year of Fatimid rule between 909 and 910 disquiet grew. Long used to being in charge, leading the *da'wa* and conducting its affairs, they argued that with the appearance of al-Mahdi and his installation as caliph, they had been relegated to the periphery. Their repeated complaints to the *da'i* Abu Abd Allah and his brother, the *da'i* Abu'l-Abbas, fell on receptive ears, for they too had sharply felt the loss of power, complaining that they were compelled to share power with those against whom they had previously fought. Amidst the dissent came calls of disappointment that al-Mahdi, who was now among them as the living Imam-caliph, was not the *mahdi* of their messianic expectations.

In February 911, matters came to a head. A conspiracy against al-Mahdi was uncovered within the *da'wa*, and an accusation of treason was levelled against the two senior *da'is*, among others. When the charges were confirmed, an official order was issued for their execution.

Yet the Imam personally led the funeral prayer over the former chief *dai* and prayed: 'May God have mercy on you, Abu Abd Allah, and reward you in the next world for your earlier efforts.' Despite his tragic fall, for generations to follow, in subsequent Ismaili sources produced in the Fatimid era, the *da'i* Abu Abd Allah al-Shi'i retained an esteemed place as the one whose arduous effort had established the Fatimid state in North Africa.

The Heir Apparent is Appointed

In the year 912, Prince Abu'l-Qasim Muhammad, al-Mahdi's eldest son, was 19 years old. He had accompanied his father as a child on the great journey from Salamiyya. Now, in the new Fatimid lands, a pronouncement was made in his name: Imam al-Mahdi decreed that Abu'l-Qasim Muhammad was the *wali al-ahd* (literally, the 'Guardian of the Covenant' but used to mean 'heir'), and his own heir and successor. Thereafter, the crown prince would be called by his regnal title, *al-Qa'im bi-Amr Allah*, 'The One who Arises by the Command of God'. In preparation for assuming the reins of leadership, the son of the Imam began attending to affairs of the state. 'Already during his father's lifetime, Abu'l-Qasim rode out under the parasol; letters and documents were dispatched in his [Abu'l-Qasim's] name; requests were directed to him, and embassies sought him out.'⁴

Of all the responsibilities placed on the new crown prince's shoulders, the most crucial was leading a critical military campaign. Disaffection had spread amongst certain Kutama clans. Reacting perhaps to the execution of the *da'i* Abu Abd Allah al-Shi'i, they put forward a new *mahdi* in opposition to the reigning Fatimid

Imam-caliph. Capturing cities, the rebels inflicted heavy losses on the Fatimid armies, and seemed to be on the verge of marching on the Fatimid capital itself. The heir to the Fatimid imamate was tasked to lead the defence, aided by Kutama commanders who had remained loyal to the Fatimids. Abu'l-Qasim secured a victory over the rebels, before proceeding to Tripoli to quash further hostility. In 913, the heir apparent returned victorious to the Fatimid capital, where great celebrations were held in his honour.

There soon came another occasion for celebration, when the cries of a newborn rang out within Fatimid palace walls. In January 914, Abu'l-Qasim welcomed the birth of his first son, Isma'il. In time, he would take the regnal name *al-Mansur bi'llah* ('the One Who is Victorious by God'), as the third Fatimid Imam-caliph. Isma'il was the first of the Fatimid rulers to be born in Ifriqiya. Over the next few years, Isma'il was a source of unbridled joy for his grandfather, al-Mahdi, and an inseparable bond developed between them. As relayed by Fatimid accounts, Isma'il was almost always found in his grandfather's presence, listening and learning as the affairs of the realm unfolded around him. He grew up to become his grandfather's companion and faithful confidant.

He (al-Mahdi) used to confide secrets in him and no one knew what transpired between them. One of the people who used to enter the presence of al-Mahdi frequently, as it was imperative for him to do so, said to me that there was never a time when he (al-Mahdi) was alone without al-Mansur being present and al-Mahdi would be speaking in confidence to him.⁵

Early Fatimid Campaigns in Egypt

*'The imam does not have the option to reduce the rights of his flock, nor is the flock to decrease the rights of their imam.'*⁶

The embittered struggle between the Alids and the Abbasids was fuelled by the establishment of the Fatimid state, which displaced Abbasid authority in North Africa. For the Fatimids, it was of strategic importance to expand their domains to Egypt, which lay at the crossroads between the Mediterranean and Red Seas, and was a conduit to the East. It was in 914 that the heir apparent, Abu'l-Qasim, led the first of three Fatimid expeditions to Egypt. The country was then under the rule of Abbasid caliphs, who sent reinforcements to bolster their Egyptian army and who thus effectively repelled the Fatimid forces. It was to be decades before the Fatimids would rule Egypt.

In his campaigns to capture Egypt, Abu'l-Qasim was able to temporarily secure the ancient port-city of Alexandria on the north coast. There, the *wali al-ahd* delivered the *khutba* commemorating the festival of Id al-Fitr (marking the completion of fasting at the end of the holy month of Ramadan). For the first time, the people of Egypt heard a Fatimid prince declare the duties and responsibilities of a righteous Imam:

'God said: "O you who believe, obey God and obey the Messenger and those with authority among you" [4:59]. Thus He makes obedience a duty, attaching it to obedience to the regulators of His affairs. They are the ones who uphold, on behalf of God, His truth and those who summon to him whoever desires

to obey Him. He singled them out by the Imamate, which is the highest of the ranks below prophecy. He prescribed for the servants rights due them and ordered them to fulfil these. He stipulated that they are connected to obeying him, doubling their reward on the measure of how well they follow those whose authority is ordained. The imam does not have the option to reduce the rights of his flock, nor is the flock to decrease the rights of their imam. Among the rights of the flock against their imam is the maintenance of the Book of God and the *Sunna* [Precedent] of His prophet, may God bless him and his family, and restitution from those who treat them unjustly for those so treated, and from the powerful among them for the weak, from the noble of them for the lowly, investigating their manner of life and the differing conditions of it, looking solicitously upon his dependants in his efforts, watching over them with his eye.⁷

Al-Mahdiyya: The First Fatimid City

*'[Imam] al-Mahdi went ... along the entire coast, looking along the sea for a site for a city which might make him and his sons after him invulnerable.'*⁸

In the year 916, the Fatimid Imam-caliph al-Mahdi set out on a long journey along the southern Mediterranean shores of what is today the Tunisian coast, traversing ancient Roman ruins and more recent settlements in search of the most suitable location for a new city. He finally decided on a site that could be well defended and that had a deep, natural harbour. Over the next four years, under al-Mahdi's watchful eye, the city began to

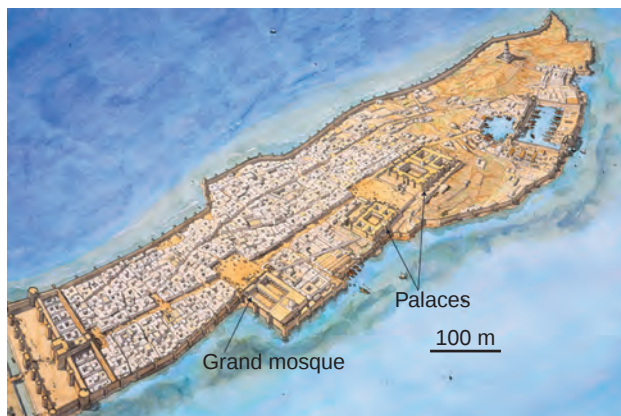


Figure 6. Mahdiyya Peninsula

A representation of Fatimid Mahdiyya by the archaeologist Jean-Claude Golvin. The mosque is near the centre of the image, while the palaces of al-Mahdi and his heir, al-Qa'im, are found towards the right.

take shape. Soon, Fatimid ships would set sail from it, proclaiming the birth of a new Mediterranean capital; it would be named *al-Mahdiyya*, after the first Fatimid Imam.

Al-Mahdiyya was built on a peninsula (see Figure 6), and accessible only through an isthmus. For the still fledgling Fatimid state, a secure capital was vital. A thick surrounding wall of stone, interspersed with towers, was constructed along the coast. At the land entrance, the fortifying wall was over 8 metres thick, in the centre of which were the city's ornately decorated wrought iron gates.

Inside the city walls, a central mosque (see Figures 7 and 8) and two palaces were built, one for al-Mahdi, the other for his son Abu'l-Qasim, Imam al-Qa'im. The palaces

faced one another, separated by a large open space that was known as Bayn al-Qasrayn ('Between the Two Palaces'). This arrangement of the palaces, and the space between them, became a defining feature of the city's landscape and was to be replicated when the Fatimids transferred their capital to Cairo, several decades later.

Like the ruins of classical Carthage to the north, al-Mahdiyya was a maritime city whose fortunes were tied to the Mediterranean Sea. The harbour of the city, with a well-equipped shipyard built nearby, sheltered



Figure 7. Mahdiyya Mosque

The reconstructed Fatimid congregational mosque of Mahdiyya, in which the early Fatimid Imam-caliphs led prayers, photographed in 2015. Built at the time of the city's founding, it measures 75m x 55m, and like other early Fatimid mosques, it does not have a minaret. This design was to serve as inspiration for subsequent Fatimid architecture.

more than 30 ships, its entrance guarded by two towers and an iron chain. Buildings to house important offices of the state were also constructed, including a mint and the central treasury (*bayt al-mal*). Large underground cisterns and wells were dug and storehouses were built for provisions. The capital would serve as a royal city, with the commercial and urban populace accommodated in the suburb of Zuwayla, a name which would also appear in the future Fatimid capital. The city of al-Mahdiyya was completed in 919, and al-Mahdi took up residence there a few years later. In al-Nu'man's words:

Imam al-Mahdi founded the proverbial city of al-Mahdiyya ... The city was one of the most wonderful constructions. He had it constructed from stone and provided it with gates of solid iron. ... He ordered to advance the construction into the sea, dig into the rock a harbour which would penetrate (the city) and link it to the sea through a passage provided with a chain to lock it.⁹

In the 10th-century Muslim world, there were many intrepid travellers who explored uncharted lands and peoples, and often recorded their experiences of the beliefs, traditions and cultures they encountered. In a similar vein, decades after the establishment of the Fatimid state, the well-known geographer Ibn Hawqal (d. 978) began a journey to chart the Muslim world. It took him over 30 years and found him travelling from northern Iran to Andalusia and across the southern shores of the Mediterranean. His map is one of the oldest surviving maps of the Muslim world, and is preserved in his *Surat al-ard* ('Configuration of the Earth'). He documented in detail the geographical features of the lands that he



Figure 8. Mahdiyya Mosque Entrance

The mosque's original arch-shaped entrance porch with its distinctive niches remains today, amid parts reconstructed during the later medieval period through to the early 20th century.

visited as well as people's interactions with each other. From his work, it becomes clear that Ibn Hawqal viewed the Fatimids favourably, and it contains suggestions that he may well have been an Ismaili himself. It was some 30 years after the founding of al-Mahdiyya when, in 947,



Figure 9. Depiction of Mahdiyya in the 16th Century

A drawing of Mahdiyya from the second volume of Frans Hogenberg and Simon Novellanus' *Civitas Orbis Terrarum*, published in Cologne, 1575. The outline and features of the city remained distinct centuries after its construction, and the port was of continued importance to subsequent rulers.

Ibn Hawqal arrived at the Fatimid capital. He noted: 'It has many palaces, clean houses and homes, with good bathhouses, its hostels generous, and has racks of fruits and produce.'¹⁰

The Inception of Fatimid Rule in Sicily

News of the pronouncement of Fatimid rule in Ifriqiya had been received with much interest and some

consternation across Sicily, for it swept away more than 70 years of Aghlabid rule over the island. Soon thereafter, the people of Palermo gathered in the city's great mosque to listen to the letter that the *da'i* Abu Abd Allah al-Shi'i had sent them, in which he promised them friendship and military reinforcements. Less than a year later, a ship bearing the island's first Fatimid ruler had dropped anchor off the Sicilian coast.

Situated at a strategic midpoint between the eastern and western halves of the Mediterranean, Sicily was perennially coveted by the empires that for millennia had waxed and waned in the region. It was a place of great natural wealth, fertile and replete with mineral resources, the island having formed out of the ashes of the great live volcano of Etna, which the Arabs called the 'Mountain of Fire' (*jabal al-nar*). Across its rolling hills and valleys, criss-crossed by countless rivers, streams and wells, Sicily's farmlands were famous. Its cereals, fruits and vegetables grew abundantly, its natural minerals were exported far and wide, and its healthy forests meant that throughout history many a Mediterranean ship was built using Sicilian wood, including those of the newly formed Fatimid navy.

A melting pot of cultures and languages, Sicily had a long-standing history of settlement by migrants from distant lands. Phoenicians and Greeks, Romans and Germanic tribesmen had flocked to the island, many building cities of their own. The first Muslims arrived in the 8th century. The efflorescence of the island under the Fatimids, some two centuries later, bequeathed a cultural and urban legacy that remains to this day.

But equally, Sicily has throughout history been a site of political and military contestations between



Figure 10. Map of Sicily

rival Mediterranean powers. Nestled at the foot of the Italian mainland and separated from it by a narrow strait, Sicily was the natural stepping-stone between the Italian mainland and North Africa, which made it a critical strategic location for control of the Mediterranean (see Figure 10). The Carthaginians of North Africa and the Romans fought fierce battles for the island between the second and first centuries BCE. A millennium later, in the 10th century, history would soon repeat itself when the island became the foremost scene of contest between the Fatimids and the Byzantines.

On its eastern coastline, the culturally rich city of Syracuse, home of theatres and temples, and birthplace

of Archimedes, ensured that Greek culture dominated Sicily for centuries. Nonetheless, in the north-east of the island, Phoenician settlers from what is today Lebanon had in the 8th century BCE founded the city of *Panormus*, 'complete port'. While eclipsed by Greek Syracuse for much of its early history, the arrival of the Arabs in the 8th century brought the old Phoenician city back into the spotlight. Making it their political and cultural centre, they called it *Balarm* – later to become 'Palermo' – a city that today remains the political and urban hub of the island.

The Byzantines took control of Sicily in the 6th century CE, when Sicily soon became a majority Christian country and bore an array of famed monks, popes, religious scholars and saints. When the Fatimids first arrived on the island in 910, few could have imagined that within decades one of these Sicilian monks would become the father-in-law to a Fatimid Imam-caliph, and that his sons would serve as influential ambassadors in the Fatimid realms.

From 827, when the Aghlabid rulers of Ifriqiya fought their first battles with the Byzantines for control over Sicily, the island became the new frontier between Byzantium and the Muslim world. More than 70 years elapsed before Sicily came under near-complete Aghlabid control. During that time, new coins minted with the inscription of *al-Siqilliya*, the Arabic name for 'Sicily', symbolised the settlement of Muslims on the island. Migrants from North Africa and further afield came to Sicily, drawn by the fertile farmlands, settling alongside the local Greek Sicilians. Over time, Arabic became the most commonly spoken language in Sicily, with Greek retained for administrative purposes.

New generations of Christians, while still retaining their old faith and Greek customs, became bilingual.

By the end of the 800s, the 'People of Sicily' (*Ahl al-Siqilliya*) emerged as the latest of the Muslim communities to be found across the Mediterranean world. Yet as a frontier zone, Sicily remained tense and volatile in the early decades of Muslim presence. The years from 886 to 900 saw outright civil war amongst the different Sicilian ethnic groups, including Arabs, Berbers and Greeks, as well as between the Sicilians and their Aghlabid overlords in Ifriqiya.

In 910, al-Hasan b. Abi Khinzir, a long-time adherent of the Ismaili *da'wa* and prefect of Qayrawan, was entrusted by al-Mahdi bi'llah, the first Fatimid Imam-caliph, with the weighty task of ruling Sicily. As he landed on the island along with the first Ismaili *qadi* of Sicily, he quickly learnt that it was a task that had cost many governors their lives. It soon became clear that the deeply entrenched divisions – that decades earlier had forced one Aghlabid army after another to alight on the island to try to secure it – remained unabated. The sources relate heightening tensions that were further exacerbated, with the established Aghlabid elites of Sicily unwilling to send tax revenues to the Fatimids. Between 913 and 914, a rebellion spearheaded by an Abbasid supporter broke out, one that came to affect the Fatimid mainland itself, as ships of the rebel leader raided the Fatimid coast.

But soon thereafter, once the Fatimid navy had rallied, the people of Sicily turned on the rebel, and segments of the populace petitioned the Fatimid Imam-caliph for their return to Fatimid rule. In 916, al-Mahdi bi'llah dispatched a significant Fatimid force to Sicily. This time,

thousands of Kutama soldiers sailed across to secure the Fatimid presence on the island. When the siege of Palermo ended in favour of the Fatimids, the Kutama became among the latest settlers in this rising Muslim city in the Mediterranean.

For the next 20 years, under a new Fatimid governor called Ibn Abi Rashid, an unrivalled period of stability reigned in the Muslim regions of Sicily. More periods of upheaval were yet to come, as was the era of the great dynasty of Fatimid governors that would usher in Muslim Sicily's golden age.

The Final Years of al-Mahdi's Reign

Al-Mahdi ruled for a quarter of a century, from 909 to 934. The final years of his reign saw the stabilising of Fatimid rule across North Africa, which now stretched from the west of modern-day Algeria to the western borders of Egypt. Rebellions had been put down and peace restored, roads and seaports were repaired and improved, merchants and artisans began to prosper, and towns and cities benefited from this new era of stability.

During that time, the Fatimid household expanded. Al-Mahdi had six sons and seven daughters, many of whom would bring up families of their own. By the 930s, al-Mahdi's devoted grandson Isma'il was in his twenties. His piety, probity and knowledge were well known, and writers often remarked on his eloquence in Arabic and his command of the language. In 931, Isma'il himself celebrated the birth of a son named Ma'add, who would one day serve as the fourth Fatimid Imam-caliph, al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah. Decades later, al-Mu'izz recalled a unique moment in the history of the Ismaili *da'wa*, and one giving a glimpse of the pride of his



Figure 11. Coin of al-Mahdi

A coin minted in Mahdiyya during the reign of Imam-caliph al-Mahdi, in the year 926. The central inscription reads 'Muhammad is the Messenger of God' and above and below this is 'The Imam, the rightly guided by God' (*al-Imam al-Mahdi bi'llah*).

great-grandfather, al-Mahdi, when father, son, grandson and great-grandson were gathered together:

[O]ne day, al-Qa'im bi-Amr Allah, upon him be peace, was in his father al-Mahdi's *majlis* (gathering), seated in front of him. His son, [Isma'il] al-Mansur, was standing in front of his grandfather, when al-Mahdi said to him, 'Bring me your son', that is, al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah. So his nursemaid brought him. He was one year old or a little older. Al-Mahdi took him on his lap and kissed him. Then he said to his son al-Qa'im bi-Amr Allah, 'O Abu'l-Qasim, there is not a gathering more illustrious on earth than this one, as four imams are gathered here.'¹¹

On 4 March 934, the Imam-caliph al-Mahdi passed away, having reigned for 25 years. As previously noted, the succession of Abu'l-Qasim al-Qa'im, as the heir apparent,

had been proclaimed early in al-Mahdi's reign. In the words of the *da'i* Ibn al-Haytham:

He [Al-Mahdi] did not depart from this world without first establishing the Commander of the Faithful al-Qa'im bi-Amr Allah as his successor, and designating him as caliph after this death. Praise be to God, who has given men the institution of the imamate, and who says [2:106] 'If we erase a sign [*aya*] or allow it to fall into oblivion, we bring a better one, or one which is like it.'¹²

Chapter 3

The Fatimid State in Transition

The Reign of al-Qa'im bi-Amr Allah (934–46)

In the year 934, the Fatimid Imam-caliph Abu'l-Qasim al-Qa'im bi-Amr Allah took up the reins of authority, aged 40. For most of the first decade of his reign, other than flare-ups in the west, the peace established in earlier years continued. In the four final years, however, the Fatimid state met its most formidable challenge in Ifriqiya; for a while, its very survival was in jeopardy. The events surrounding this challenge were definitive in shaping the empire in the decades that followed.

First, however, al-Qa'im needed to attend to the burial of his father and safeguard the continuation of the imamate. For this, he turned to Ustadh Jawdhar, who had loyally and capably served al-Mahdi for over 20 years. During the solemn ritual of burial, al-Qa'im entrusted Jawdhar with the name of his own heir, as noted in Jawdhar's biography, the *Sirat Jawdhar*:

Indeed, when he [al-Qa'im] wanted to bury al-Mahdi bi-llah, he summoned me to the exclusion of everybody and said to me, while I was alone with him on the edge of the grave in which he wanted to lower al-Mahdi bi-llah, 'O Jawdhar, it is not permissible to the *hujja* [proof] succeeding the imam to bury the imam until he has appointed his own *hujja*. Thus it is not permissible for me to do so [bury my father, al-Mahdi] until I have



Figure 12. Mosaic from al-Qa'im's Palace Floor

Part of a 50m² mosaic floor excavated in the early 20th century from the palace of Imam-caliph al-Qa'im bi-Amr Allah in Mahdiyya. While the use of geometric patterns was a well-established feature of Islamic art in the 4th/10th century, surviving mosaic works from the Fatimid period are extremely rare.

appointed my *hujja*. I am satisfied with you to confide you this trust to the exclusion of everybody.' ... 'My son Isma'il [al-Mansur] is my *hujja* and heir apparent, so recognise his rights and observe complete secrecy about his status until I myself make it public when God wills and at the time He will choose.'¹

With the identity of his *hujja* secure, Imam al-Qa'im turned his attention to matters of his caliphate.

Securing the Western Borders

From across the narrow strait of water that separates Spain and North Africa, the Umayyads of Spain had been



Figure 13. Fatimid Glass Griffin

A green glass plaque moulded in Ifriqiya in the 10th century. In the middle of the representation of a griffin, the inscription reads 'al-Imam al-Qa'im bi-Amr Allah'.

warily watching the steady rise of the Fatimids. Their rivalry with the Alids dated back to the caliphate of Imam Ali, when Mu'awiya, the Umayyad governor of Syria, had rebelled against his rule. Whilst the rivalry had been relatively subdued during the time of al-Mahdi, it was during al-Qa'im's reign that the animosity between the Umayyads and the Fatimids came to the forefront.

In the western regions of the Fatimid realms, those of present-day Algeria and Morocco, the proxy war between the Umayyads and the Fatimids was reignited. Regional clans and dynasties began allying themselves with the Umayyads to fight those tribes who gave their allegiance to the Fatimids. To secure the western borders of the Fatimid realms, in 936, al-Qa'im decreed the building of a new city.

Ziri b. Manad was a chieftain of the great confederation of the Sanhaja Berber tribes, and was among the loyal adherents of the Fatimids. For generations,

the Sanhaja and the Zanata Berbers had suffered from intractable rivalries. Inevitably, the Zanata found eager allies in the Umayyads. In anticipation of a new round of warfare, the Sanhaja chieftain Ziri began the task of securing the Fatimid borders. Under his supervision, the new city of Ashir was built in the Titteri mountains, south of present-day Algiers. From his capital al-Mahdiyya, the Imam-caliph sent various tradesmen along with money, iron and other resources.

In time, Ziri's son, Buluggin, would serve as the Fatimid governor in North Africa, eventually founding his own dynasty in the region. In the meantime, it was not long before Ziri was compelled to ride eastwards in defence of the Fatimid Imam-caliph.

From Crisis to Construction:

Sicily during the Reign of al-Qa'im bi-Amr Allah

When torrential rain turned acres of farmland into swampland, and heaving rock-strewn floods cascaded through the once verdant valleys, the Sicilians had to contend with the fact that their famously fertile island was not immune to the ravages of nature. In the years leading up to 937, extreme weather conditions wrought catastrophe across Sicily. Crops failed, farms were destroyed, trade ground to a halt and the 20-year stability was shattered. Dormant tensions erupted into civil war, directed mainly against the new Kutama elite who had displaced the old landed gentry. A rebellion was sparked off in the Berber-dominated regions of Sicily and spread to Palermo. Soon, on the orders of Imam-caliph al-Qa'im, a new governor was sent to pacify the island.

Khalil b. Ishaq al-Tamimi, a noted figure in the Fatimid army and a poet, had for years ruled as prefect of Qayrawan. By the end of 937, he arrived on the island

as its new governor, only to become embroiled in some of the bloodiest battles in the history of Muslim Sicily, involving wide-scale destruction and fatalities, and earning him a particularly notorious reputation among his opponents. It was only in 941, as conditions across the island improved, that stability began to be restored. Efforts at reconstruction commenced and prosperity gradually returned. Among the notable legacies of al-Tamimi was his development of Palermo's cityscape.

Situated at a natural harbour in the north-west of the island, Palermo had grown considerably since the first Muslims had arrived and settled in what they called *al-Madina*. The old city, surrounded by high walls and fortifications, was also referred to as *al-Qasr* ('the Castle'). Between 827 and 937, it had become densely populated, with suburbs sprawling beyond the city walls. But now, adjacent to the old city, upon the orders of Imam-caliph al-Qa'im bi-Amr Allah, a new district was established.

This new citadel town, protected by walls and shaped somewhat like a trapezium, was built to the south-west of the harbour. On its northern, western and southern sides, gateways led to the interior, their names echoing those of previous Fatimid archways such as *Bab al-futuh* (the 'Gate of Victory'), a name that would become synonymous with Fatimid cities. Inside the citadel town, a number of buildings were constructed. These included the governor's residence and administrative halls, an arsenal for the manufacture and storage of weapons, barracks, bath-houses and a new congregational mosque.

The new town was given the name *al-Khalisa*, meaning 'the Pure', as a symbol of its construction in allegiance to the Fatimid Imam-caliph al-Qa'im. Over time, al-Khalisa became a unique urban area in Palermo's topography.

Its strategic positioning over the harbour and its unyielding walls and towers caused it to remain at the centre of political life in Palermo, just as Palermo itself has endured as the capital of Sicily.

Over the decades, Muslim Palermo continued to expand, and new, unplanned districts sprang up between the old Qasr and the new Khalisa until the two merged together. Even centuries later, however, al-Khalisa retained its distinct identity. Today, the historical 'Kalsa' district of modern Palermo still bears the name of the old Fatimid centre.

The Khariji Rebellion

In the summer of 944, the tenth year of al-Qa'im's reign, a grey-haired teacher, draped in a simple white cloak and a tall, white cap was seen riding a donkey through the hilly paths north of Qayrawan. Abu Yazid al-Nukkari, then in his sixties, had by that time become one of the most powerful men in region. Behind him marched a formidable army of Khariji Berber tribesmen, whose goal was to topple Fatimid rule in North Africa.

Educated in Tahert, a town in western Ifriqiya, Abu Yazid, who belonged to a Berber clan rivalling the Kutama, began seeking supporters for a campaign against the Fatimids. Over the next 15 years, backed by the Umayyads of Spain, the rebels gained a nearly unstoppable momentum.

The origins of the Kharijis lay in the tumultuous events of the first Muslim civil war, when a group of tribesmen seceded from the army of Ali b. Abi Talib during the Battle of Siffin (657). Though Imam Ali defeated the Kharijis in battle, it was the sword of a Khariji assassin in 661 that struck him down. Thereafter,

the Kharijis gained followers, especially in Basra and Oman, where they developed and proclaimed their own interpretation of the imamate. They deemed that piety was the sole criterion for becoming an Imam, regardless of family or ethnic background. Thus, they rejected the Umayyad claim to the caliphate, as well as the 'Alid claim that only descendants of the Prophet can legitimately lead the Muslim community.

During the seventh and eighth centuries, Khariji doctrines found reception in North Africa. The Berber tribes, tired of being treated as subsidiaries under the Umayyads, cherished the ideals of equality offered by the Kharijis. At Tahert, in modern-day Algeria, they had established their own Khariji imamate. Their rule in the area ended following their defeat at the hands of the *da'i* Abu Abd Allah al-Shi'i in 909.

Now, in 943, having spent years gathering support, the Khariji Abu Yazid al-Nukkari launched a series of attacks that caught the Fatimids by surprise. In October 944, he was able to secure control of Qayrawan. The Sunni Maliki religious scholars of the city, whose religious authority had waned under the new regime, thought they had found a suitable ally to depose the Fatimids. They supported the Khariji rebel's cause, despite significant ideological differences. By the year 944, the armies of Abu Yazid had pushed Fatimid rule back to the Mediterranean coast, with only the capital, al-Mahdiyya, and a few other strongholds remaining secure. When one Fatimid town fell after another, it looked as if the armies of Abu Yazid would carry all before them. Yet, away from the capital, a few stalwarts of the regime stood firm in staving off ruin.

On the eve of Abu Yazid's revolt, one of the greatest bulwarks against the Khariji advance was al-Hasan al-Kalbi, governor of Tunis. Al-Hasan b. Ali al-Kalbi, who traced his lineage to the ancient and famed Arab tribe of the Kalb, was an established figure in the Fatimid administration. Ten years earlier, his father, Ali al-Kalbi, had died in Sicily fighting for the Fatimids, during one of the island's recurring civil wars. Now, as the Fatimid domains were in peril, al-Hasan al-Kalbi led his army eastwards to the city of Constantine for a spirited defence. Over the course of the rebellion, he led both Arab and Kutama soldiers to defend the city and the Kutama homelands nearby. The Khariji assault soon faltered, and al-Hasan took the offensive, heading westward with his horsemen to recapture Beja. In a final assault, al-Hasan descended to the coast to retake Tunis from the rebels. A whole swathe of the North African coastland now lay under al-Kalbi's control, setting the way for his family to become among the esteemed households serving the Fatimid cause.

Nonetheless, by the year 944, in the eyes of many, Abu Yazid was on the verge of victory. An air of desperation hung over Mahdiyya. Streams of refugees approached the city, reporting that Abu Yazid's army was not far behind. The Fatimid armies prepared for a final standoff. When Abu Yazid's troops finally approached the city, the Khariji chief himself led the charge on the city walls.

In later years, Fatimid sources would note that it was for this very moment, 'for a single hour of one day', that al-Mahdi had expended considerably on the walls of the capital. They proved unassailable. The armies of Abu Yazid were unable to scale or breach them, so they resorted to laying siege to the city. For the first time, it seemed that the tides were turning.

The siege of Mahdiyya continued from 20 January to 16 September 945. Yet gradually the Fatimids began to gain ground. During this time, the soldiers of Qayrawan left Abu Yazid's ranks and returned to the Fatimid fold, and the rebels suffered a major defeat. Most of the Fatimid realms nonetheless remained in Abu Yazid's grip.

At the height of the crisis, and unbeknown to many, the Imam-caliph al-Qa'im bi-Amr Allah was lying on his deathbed. Inside the city, the Kutama had rallied to the defence of the capital with the other soldiers of the realms. It was to them especially that al-Qa'im, in the final weeks of his life, composed a sermon to be read out by his chief judge:

'You have done, O men of the Kutama, what your fathers and veterans among your forbears did as required for obedience and adhering to its bond and taking shade in its shadow, and fighting for God with the effort due to Him ... He made of you its pride and its glory. You are like the Apostles of Jesus, and the *Ansar* ['Helpers'] of Muhammad, may God bless them both.'²

Around this time, the Imam-caliph al-Qa'im issued a pronouncement that many had long awaited. His son Isma'il, the future Imam-caliph al-Mansur, was declared his heir and successor. The medieval Ismaili scholar Idris Imad al-Din relates:

[Imam-caliph al-Qa'im bi-Amr Allah] revealed the affair [*amr*] of his son Abu'l-Tahir Isma'il al-Mansur bi'llah, conferred the succession upon him, and designated him as his heir. He made this known to the followers of the *da'wa*, and announced to the entire world that he was the heir to the throne and the successor [*khalifa*] after his death.³



Figure 14. Coin of al-Qa'im (Heir Apparent)

A coin from Mahdiyya during the reign of Imam-caliph al-Mahdi, in 306/918, minted for the expedition to Egypt of his son and heir apparent, Imam al-Qa'im bi-Amr Allah.

The Succession of al-Mansur bi'llah (946–53)

As the people of Mahdiyya gathered for the Id prayers, a mood of celebration swept through the city. Abu Yazid's blockade had finally come to an end. The next Imam, al-Mansur bi'llah, emerged from the palace, 'surrounded by his sons, his brothers, his followers, the adherents of his government and his servants'. Ma'add, the son of Isma'il and the future Imam al-Mu'izz, was probably in the entourage of the new heir. As the people gathered to listen to al-Mansur's sermon, they came to know one of his unique qualities which even his adversaries admired, namely, his eloquence of speech and his mastery of language. As one such writer, Ibn Hammad, wrote: 'He was valiant and bold ... eloquent and a master of classical Arabic, so much so that he could preach the sermon spontaneously.'⁴

On 18 May 946, the Imam-caliph al-Qa'im passed away. But the news was not made public. Abu Yazid's

armies still controlled much of the Fatimid realms, and the news might have deflated the Fatimid forces while boosting enemy morale. So al-Mansur took to the field as the crown prince, the *wali al-ahd*. Few then had imagined the speed and ferocity of the new Imam-caliph's response.

Al-Mansur directed a counter-attack against the forces of Abu Yazid. Reinforcements were sent by sea to lift the siege of the coastal city of Sousse, one of the few remaining in Fatimid hands, forcing the Khariji rebels to retreat to Qayrawan. To Abu Yazid's astonishment, however, the people of Qayrawan had locked the city's gates to him. By now, many of Qayrawan's inhabitants had turned against Abu Yazid and wished to restore their allegiance to the Fatimids. On the streets, the cry was heard, 'obedience only to Isma'il (al-Mansur)'.⁵

It was May 947 when al-Mansur personally led the Fatimid army in a decisive encounter with Abu Yazid's army. At a battlefield just south of Qayrawan, the Fatimid and the Khariji forces faced each other in their trenches, waiting for the command to attack. In July, the Kharijis attacked the Fatimid camp. For a while, it seemed that the armies of Abu Yazid had broken through, but the Imam-caliph al-Mansur plunged himself into the heart of the battle. He forbade his personal guards to lower the parasol that marked his position. When the Kutama saw the Imam surrounded but unwavering, they rallied round. The battle turned, and the armies of Abu Yazid were beaten back. The momentum had shifted once and for all. Some two months later, the Fatimids attacked Abu Yazid's camp. This time, they forced a rout, and Abu Yazid had no choice but retreat to the mountains to

the west. A chase ensued. Al-Mansur led his troops in pursuit of Abu Yazid across the rugged northern African terrain, through mountains and desert tracks. In August 947, Abu Yazid was finally cornered by the Fatimid forces in the Hodna mountains of present-day Algeria, and he died of his wounds.

Al-Mansur's victory marked a significant turning point in Fatimid fortunes. Following this success, the Imam-caliph formally announced the death of his father al-Qa'im bi-Amr Allah, and he himself adopted the regnal name *al-Mansur bi-Nasr Allah* ('the One Who is Victorious by the Victory of God').



Figure 15. *Tiraz* of al-Mansur

A *tiraz* fabric dated to the era of al-Mansur (10th century). *Tiraz* were usually worn as clothing or used for burial shrouds, with inscriptions of the Imam-caliphs' names often woven into them. Bestowed by the Imam-caliphs as marks of honour, these became highly sought-after items. The inscription reads '... *li'l-Mansur al kh[alifa]*'.

Recovery of Fatimid Rule

Ifriqiya had suffered badly from the ravages of warfare. Refugees uprooted from their villages had flooded into the larger towns in the hope of finding safety from marauding soldiers. Merchant stores had been plundered, markets lay abandoned and farmlands had turned into wasteland. Neighbouring communities who had fought one another remained tense. The long drawn-out saga which resulted in the death of Abu Yazid had taken its toll, damaging both the economy and the ties that held society together. Al-Mansur began his reign by seeking to institute policies to restore the economy and the bonds of community. The new government policies adopted would become the hallmarks of Fatimid rule.

The day following the Fatimid victory over Abu Yazid at Qayrawan was a Friday. When the inhabitants of the city gathered to hear the *khutba*, an elderly man ascended the pulpit. It was Ja'far al-Hajib, the trusted chamberlain and travel companion of al-Mahdi. Now in his seventies, and having served the first two Imam-caliphs, Ja'far had been tasked by al-Mansur to read out a unique sermon, one cancelling tax dues, especially the land tax, measures designed to restore prosperity to the people and the land:

'The Commander, may God give him strength, has relinquished the dues incumbent on you in the coming year ... and the alms taxes, and all the obligations, and he does this for all the people, Muslims as well as the protected peoples [that is, the Christians and Jews], out of kindness to them, and to aid them in restoring their land and steppes. So let those who witness this convey it to those who are absent.'⁶

But it was al-Mansur's handling of Qayrawan itself that subsequently became a benchmark. After the defeat

of Abu Yazid, the Imam-caliph decided that, rather than appoint an Ismaili *qadi* over the city, as had been the earlier practice, he would appoint a Sunni Maliki chief justice instead. His choice was Muhammad b. Abi'l-Manzur, a respected Maliki scholar who had spent a number of years studying in Iraq and Yemen.

This was a momentous development in Islamic governance, for it allowed the formal recognition of a legal school that was different from that of the reigning dynasty. Among the first responsibilities of the Maliki *qadi* was distributing the booty taken from Abu Yazid's camp as *sadaqa*, charity, to the poor and the destitute of Qayrawan.

Mansuriyya: The City Victorious

In the dawn of the new reign, a new Fatimid capital city was built, one to serve as a bridge between the Sunni communities of Qayrawan and the communities of followers of the Fatimids. Half a mile (approximately 2 kilometres) south-east of Qayrawan lay the site of the great battlefield where the Fatimid armies had triumphed over the Khariji forces of Abu Yazid. As the site was now considered auspicious, on the orders of al-Mansur it became the location of *al-Mansuriyya* ('the Victorious'), the new Fatimid capital. The features of this city came to serve as a prototype for the subsequent founding in Egypt of the third Fatimid capital, by al-Mansur's son.

Mansuriyya took its inspiration from some of the great cities of the Muslim world and inherited features from the first capital, Mahdiyya. It was built as a circular city, like Baghdad, and had an outer wall of baked clay with four gates, one for each point of the compass. A marketplace soon flourished, and before long three large water cisterns were built to ensure a regular water

supply; in the centre of the city stood the palace of the Imam-caliph.

To populate the new capital, 14,000 Kutama families were settled at Mansuriyya. As the new capital was intended to be a palatial city, when artisans and merchants flocked to the new centre, they settled in the new suburbs that developed beyond the outer walls.

While Mansuriyya took its place among the other vibrant cities in North Africa at the time, it was the ruins of ancient cities in the region, like those of Carthage, which fascinated Imam al-Mansur. He was known to frequent these historical sites, usually accompanied by his son and successor Ma'add (Imam al-Mu'izz).

In the vicinity of the city of Tahert, in North Africa, the remnants of three large burial mounds, once



Figure 16. Ceramic Bowl from Raqqada

A glazed ceramic bowl made in North Africa between the 9th and 10th centuries. Like many other objects of art of this period, decoration in the Arabic Kufic script adorns this piece.

pyramid shaped, are still visible today. Al-Mansur was so fascinated by a Latin inscription on a stele found at the site that he had it translated. It had been commissioned by a Byzantine governor who ruled there 400 years earlier. The inscription read: 'I am Solomon [the commander], this land is called Mauritania ... I have built this building, so as to perpetuate the memory of him [the Byzantine Emperor] and of the victory which God has granted me.'⁷ But it was ancient Carthage, once the great Punic rival to Rome, which particularly intrigued al-Mansur. Years later, his son and successor al-Mu'izz remembered a visit to its ruins alongside his father:

When [Imam] al-Mansur came to the area of al-Tunis – this was the time when he sent the fleet out to raid the Byzantines – he camped at the ruins of Carthage, which are truly among the most astonishing buildings of the ancients, and he spent several days there.

One morning when I entered [his tent] he said: 'I will tell you about the marvels of these buildings! I cannot get them out of my mind, so that I say to myself: If only I knew who built them! Was it one single man, or did a number of men follow one another? And how did the builder ever complete it, with these enormous dimensions? And I said to myself: If the builder was only a single king, how could he make the city so spacious, whereas the lifespan of a man is not long enough for that? But if one king followed another, then how did they all agree on this place, whereas men – and kings especially – have seldom agreed where cities ought to be put?'⁸

It would not be long before the Imam's own son, al-Mu'izz, would himself become the founder of one of the greatest cities of the Muslim world.

Qadi al-Nu'man Appointed Chief Justice

By the spring of 948, Imam al-Mansur returned to Mansuriyya, where he was greeted by throngs of people celebrating the end of the war. One of the first things he did was to summon the judge of the city of Tripoli in the east. This Ismaili scholar, Qadi al-Nu'man, became renowned through history as one of the most influential of all the scholars, jurists and writers of the Fatimid age. As we have seen, it is to his scholarship that we owe much of our knowledge of early Fatimid history, thought and law. After receiving the summons, Qadi al-Nu'man travelled west towards the capital, to take up his new position as the chief judge of the Fatimid realms:

When Imam al-Mansur brought me to the court from Tripoli, it so happened that I arrived on a Friday morning ... he commanded me to proceed forthwith to the Great mosque in Qayrawan, and to lead the prayer and to preach the sermon ... On the following day, he sent a letter in his own hand to the chancery to the effect that a document should be issued naming me as judge of the cities of al-Mansuriyya, al-Mahdiyya, and al-Qayrawan, as well as of all the cities of Ifriqiya and its provinces. This was read out and circulated among the people.⁹

We know little about the early phase of Qadi al-Nu'man's life. His father, Muhammad b. Mansur, was most probably a Sunni scholar of the Maliki school of law who joined the Ismaili *da'wa* around the time of the founding of the Fatimid state, and Qadi al-Nu'man himself was probably brought up as an Ismaili. From a young age, his aptitude for learning

was recognised as he entered the service of the Fatimid Imams:

I served Imam al-Mahdi towards the end of his life, for nine years and a number of months and days. Then, after his death, [I served] Imam al-Qa'im through the course of his life, and during this entire time, every day – aside from a very few days – I brought him the news of the court ... When Imam al-Qa'im died, Imam al-Mansur made me judge, before he made himself known as Caliph; I was the first judge whom he appointed.¹⁰

During his earlier years in the reign of al-Mahdi, Qadi al-Nu'man was just beginning his career, and, as he himself states, he excelled as a 'collector and copyist of books'. As a scholar in his own right, he composed a voluminous book of the *hadiths* of the early Imams of the *ahl al-bayt*, relating to laws and ritual obligations, based mainly on the pronouncements of Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq. Called the *Kitab al-Idah* ('Book of Elucidation'), Qadi al-Nu'man's composition comprised some 220 chapters, spanning over 6,000 pages. Imam-caliph al-Mansur referred to it as one of his most treasured works. While summaries have survived, only 225 pages of the original text are extant today.

Even then, Qadi al-Nu'man had not yet reached the zenith of his scholarly career. This would be realised, along with the writing of his most important books, during the time of al-Mansur's successor, Imam al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah. Soon after Qadi al-Nu'man arrived at Mansuriyya, he caught his first glimpse of Ma'add (Imam al-Mu'izz), then 17 years old, riding on horseback. They exchanged a few words, and Ma'add made an impression on the *qadi* – a signal of the bond that later would be forged between him and the future Imam.

Al-Hasan al-Kalbi Secures Muslim Rule in Sicily

When, in 948, Imam-caliph al-Mansur bi'llah returned to his new capital, amongst the heaving crowds and beaming dignitaries gathered to greet him, one figure in particular stood out. Al-Hasan b. Ali al-Kalbi, governor of Tunis and 'Lord of Constantine' had marched south at the head of 300 horsemen to welcome the Imam personally during the celebrations at the capital. Undoubtedly one of the most powerful men in the Fatimid lands, with cavalry as well as a powerful fleet of ships moored in Tunis' harbour, al-Hasan was now charged by the Imam-caliph with a unique mission, one which in due course gave rise to the only Muslim dynasty of Sicily.

While warfare raged in North Africa, the embers of revolt were once more lit in Palermo in 947. Sparked by elites from the old Arab families from Aghlabid times, and catalysed by a peace treaty between the Fatimids and the Byzantines that halted the monies once reaped by the Sicilian soldiery, the revolt led to an assault on the Fatimid governor. When news reached the Fatimid capital, Imam-caliph al-Mansur turned to al-Hasan with the demanding task of restoring stability to the island. By the spring of 948, al-Hasan al-Kalbi had taken his seat in Palermo, quickly dousing the rebellion. The century-plus rule of the Kalbids of Sicily had begun.

Soon after Hasan al-Kalbi took his seat in the Khalisa district of Palermo, the threat that had long loomed over Muslim presence on the island re-emerged. Reports flooded into Palermo that a grand Byzantine army was gathering at the tip of Italy, heralding the fact that the Emperor of Constantinople, as the inheritor of Rome, was once again ready to lay claim to the island.

Separated by the waters of the western Mediterranean, the Umayyads of Spain and the Byzantines had both watched the rise of the Fatimids in North Africa with a wary eye. In 949, a flurry of activity signalled a resumption of negotiations between Cordoba and Constantinople. Amidst an exchange of ambassadors and precious gifts, the Umayyads and Byzantines forged a new pact to curb Fatimid expansion. The increasing presence of soldiers on the shores of Sicily was amongst the first salvos of the Byzantine-Umayyad alliance.

In 950, Imam-caliph al-Mansur bi'llah and his son Ma'add bade farewell to a new Fatimid armada sent to strengthen al-Hasan al-Kalbi's forces. News of al-Hasan's brilliance on the battlefield quickly reached the Fatimid capital. Between 951 and 952, the Kalbid commander launched assaults from Sicily on the Italian mainland itself, routing Byzantine forces. The Byzantines quickly sued for a new peace treaty, and for the next three years peace prevailed. During that period, a new Imam-caliph ascended to the Fatimid caliphate. But the Byzantine-Umayyad alliance had only just begun its assault, and it would initiate one of the longest periods of naval warfare in the Fatimid age.

The Imam-caliph's Confidant

Beside al-Mansur bi'llah when he had set out for the final confrontation with Abu Yazid's sons was his own son Abu Tamim Ma'add, the future Imam-caliph al-Mu'izz. From the age of 16, he became increasingly involved with the affairs of government, serving as an aide to his father.

During the reign of al-Mansur, an enduring relationship between his son and Qadi al-Nu'man was



Figure 17. Coin of al-Mansur

A coin minted in Mansuriyya in 952/953. The centre field contains the name 'al-Mansur bi'llah, Commander of the Faithful'.

formed. The *qadi* wrote about how the prince had helped him during his first days as the chief judge. He relates in his famous work *al-Majalis wa'l-musayarat* that when Mansuriyya was still a building site, and the law courts could only be convened in a hallway of the grand palace, it was Ma'add who, after conferring with Qadi al-Nu'man, emerged from his father's presence carrying the building order and funds for a dedicated courthouse. Soon, Ma'add became an intermediary and advisor between the court officials and Imam al-Mansur. Qadi al-Nu'man writes:

In the days of al-Mansur bi'llah, I used to rely on al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah to advise me on those matters that I needed to undertake and submit to al-Mansur. Whenever I intended to do so, I would begin by raising it [first] with al-Mu'izz and sought his sound opinion. Whatever he ordered me to do I would implement, and what he was averse to I would forego.¹¹

It was sometime after his return to Mansuriyya that the Imam-caliph formally announced Ma'add as his successor. Henceforth, the *wali al-ahd* became Imam al-Mansur's 'confidant concerning all his matters, the keeper of his secrets and his trusts. The administrative heads (*abwab*), *da'is* and people of state could only access al-Mansur through al-Mu'izz and at his behest.'¹²

The support of his successor would have been a welcome respite for al-Mansur, who had spent much of his reign on the battlefield. It may well have allowed him the opportunity to write one of his books. Al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah relates:

I once accompanied al-Mansur on one of his journeys. He had stopped at an estate, and was staying there in one of his castles, which was surrounded by a garden with flowing water. One day I went out to walk around the estate, and when I returned, I sought him out, as was my custom. I found him under a tree – it was a hot summer day – with his bare shaved head uncovered, streaming with sweat, as he wrote down the text of a book he was composing.¹³

While al-Mu'izz's eyewitness account does not name the book which al-Mansur was composing, it is apt to imagine that such labour resulted in the *Tathbit al-Imama* ('Foundations of the Imamate'), a book that still survives today, dedicated to the question of legitimate authority and the concept of the imam.

In his *Tathbit*, al-Mansur presents arguments that assert the necessity of a divinely chosen guide for the Muslim community and establishes the legitimacy of the position and doctrines of the Ismaili Imams. The work begins with al-Mansur asserting the legitimacy of

Ali b. Abi Talib's succession as Imam after the death of the Prophet Muhammad. He then discusses alternative ideas of the imamate as advocated by different Muslim communities, and emphasises that the Imam must be from the progeny of the Prophet, whose sole heirs are the Fatimid Imam-caliphs, to whom obedience is due by all Muslims. Al-Mansur's *Tathbit* remains one of the earliest works composed by a Fatimid Imam, providing an articulation of the doctrine of imamate for his time and age.

Succession to the Imamate

The companions of Imam al-Mansur had often seen him, pen in hand, writing. Yet on one particular occasion in 953, he suffered a fatal relapse of the chronic liver illness that had been plaguing him for some time. The pen fell from his grasp, the ink staining his clothes. He was only 39 years old.

Years later, his son (Ma'add) al-Mu'izz recalled the final days of his father's life, as did those companions and followers who witnessed them. Some of these reports were documented by Qadi al-Nu'man, for they conveyed a crucial aspect of the idea of the imamate, that of *ta'yid* (divine support), the idea that God provides continuing support and knowledge to the Imam of the time. In Qadi al-Nu'man's account of his journey accompanying Imam al-Mansur and Ma'add through the farming regions of the Fatimid lands, he notes how al-Mansur brought the procession to a halt, as was his custom, to arbitrate between two rival claimants concerning a land dispute. Yet this time he referred the claimants to the young al-Mu'izz for his judgement on the case. The *qadi* also recorded other occasions, such

as when the ailing al-Mansur sought to appoint a leading *da'i* in Sind, which was among the regions where the Fatimid *da'wa* had taken root. The Imam asked al-Mu'izz his choice of *da'i*, and when he handed the Imam the paper on which he had written his preference, al-Mansur saw that it matched his own. For Qadi al-Nu'man, these events provided a manifestation of the transference of *ta'yid* in the final days of al-Mansur's life, from father to son. He states that as God had assisted one Imam, so too would He assist successive Imams, until the end of time. Al-Mu'izz relates a particularly moving description of al-Mansur's immediate reaction when he saw that both he and his son had made the same decision:

Al-Mansur embraced and hugged me to his chest. He kissed my neck and placed his cheek against it for a long while. He was weeping so much that his tears wet my collar. I wept at his weeping. No, by God, I did not know the meaning of that weeping until he died, whereupon I realised that it was his farewell to me. When he saw that [incident], he recognised that his time was ending, as he had witnessed the transfer of [God's] support (*ta'yid*) to me.¹⁴

After these words, Qadi al-Nu'man notes: 'Indeed, divine support is [finally] transferred during the last breath of the previous Imam.'

Chapter 4

The Making of an Empire

While al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah began his 23-year reign in his father's city, al-Mansuriyya, he would see out his final days in a newly founded capital far to the east. This would come to be ranked among the greatest cities of Muslim civilisation, and it continues to carry his name even now, *al-Qahira al-Mu'izziya* ('the Victorious City of al-Mu'izz') – modern-day Cairo.

Over those 23 years, the Fatimid realms were transformed from a regional North African dynasty to a thriving Mediterranean empire, based on the River Nile. The structure of the Fatimid administration, the legal system and principles that regulated the relationship between government and society, and relations with neighbouring empires, as well as the doctrines of the *da'wa*, were all transformed during this age. The policies established by al-Mu'izz would function as guiding principles for his successors in generations to come.

The Accession of al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah (953–75)

On the occasion of the *Id al-Adha* (the 'Festival of Sacrifice', commemorating Abraham's intended sacrifice of his son Ishmael and God's intervention) in 953, a proclamation was issued to the adherents of the *da'wa* across Ifriqiya, causing them to flock to al-Mansuriyya. At the *musalla*, the open prayer space just outside the city, believers

saw the new Imam ascend the pulpit. After praising God and invoking blessings on the Prophet and his family, Abu Tamim Ma'add announced the demise of his father:

O God, distinguish the eminent imam, the just legatee (*al-wasi al-adil*), the perfectly righteous, the showering rain. ... Your servant, your *wali* [friend], your noble one, your sincere friend, Abu Tahir (al-Mansur) ... Anxiety and intense longing for you have overcome us. O father! O master! O Isma'il! O Aba Tahir! O sea of knowledge of the pure rightly-guided imams! O most excellent of the progeny of the Messenger and of the descendants of the *wasi* [Ali] and the pure and chaste [Fatima]! O Imam of the community (*umma*) and key to the gate of mercy ... Assembly of our *awliya'* (friends), professors of obedience to us and adherents to our *walaya* (devotional obedience)! By God, these are arduous ordeals which ripen the liver.¹

Further in his sermon, Ma'add recounted the principles of adherence to the Imam:

O people! There is no living creature who is not subject to death, nor is there death without resurrection, or resurrection without being called to account, be it reward or punishment. Blessed is he who meets God clutching the waistband (*hujza*) of His *awliya'* [i.e., the Imams], seeking safety through their impeccability, upholding the obligations of submission prescribed by His proofs and sincere friends (i.e., the imams), shaded by the banners of the descendants of our master Muhammad, the Messenger of God ... The Light, O people, is sustained in us and the gift of your Lord is granted uninterrupted to us.²

With this proclamation, the Imam Abu Tamim Ma'add began his reign, and hereon assumed his regnal title,

al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah (the 'One Who Strengthens the Religion of God').

Restoring peace and prosperity was a vital priority for the empire. Even though almost eight years had passed since the defeat of Abu Yazid's rebellion, flames of anarchy and chaos still flickered in the mountain passes west of Qayrawan. Hosts of brigands, highway robbers and the remnants of rebel factions were entrenched there. Instead of conducting an armed campaign, al-Mu'izz began a policy of securing alliances and issuing pardons to the local chieftains. As later historians would comment, it was a far-sighted policy which brought many once-hostile tribes into the Fatimid fold. Critical for building prosperity was an effective administration and a clearly defined relationship between the state and its citizens. The task of implementing these measures fell upon the shoulders of some of the most loyal stalwarts of the administration as well as the erudite scholars of the Fatimid age.

Jawdhār and Jawhar: Stalwarts of the State

Over the 40 years since the beginning of Fatimid rule, the government had evolved into a complex administration staffed by trusted officials. The main departments, called *diwans*, those of finance and the treasury, the army and communications, were each run by appointed ministers who reported to the Imam-caliph. Under them, dispersed across the lands, were the host of government employees, bureaucrats, tax officials, agents of the postal system, market inspectors and many others. In each province, the authority of the Imam was delegated to a regional governor. The chief judge, who oversaw the network of courts, official notaries and witnesses across the empire, headed the judicial system.

Amongst the myriad Fatimid officials were long-standing stalwarts of the state, whose expertise and loyalty to the Fatimid house had made them invaluable in state administration. But of the most esteemed individuals in the reign of al-Mu'izz, the veteran al-Ustadh Jawdhar rose above all others. Previously, the dependable servant of al-Mahdi and confidant of al-Qa'im, Jawdhar had continued to serve under al-Mansur, who entrusted his most precious possessions, namely, the scrolls of his father and other treasured texts, to Jawdhar for safekeeping. As al-Mansur's reign continued, he placed greater trust in Jawdhar, appointing him as supervisor of the treasury and overseer of the important state-owned textile factories that produced the highly valued *tiraz* fabrics – inscribed textiles given by the Imam-caliphs as gifts to honour those who had served the state. When al-Mansur set out in pursuit of Abu Yazid, Jawdhar was also given responsibility for safeguarding affairs of the state in his absence.

Jawdhar was in his old age when, early in the new reign, he received a letter from al-Mu'izz inviting him to live in a home alongside his own palace in al-Mansuriyya. As the letter suggested, Jawdhar had become practically a member of the family. In the years that followed, he would continue his role as chief administrator and dedicated advisor to the Imam. He became responsible for numerous aspects of government, including supervising the Fatimid navy, organising the defence of the coastline, dealing with complaints against government officials, advising on international trade and diplomacy, land and grazing rights, and much more.

Over the following years, many letters relating to the governance of empire were sent to Jawdhar, who



Figure 18. *Tiraz* of al-Mu'izz

A *tiraz* fabric dated to the era of al-Mu'izz (10th century). Fatimid *tiraz* was usually produced in state-controlled factories, which in this period were managed mainly by al-Ustadh Jawdhar. The inscription reads 'In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful. May God's blessings be upon Muhammad, Seal of the Prophets, and his family ... from God ... for the servant of God and His believer, Ma'ad al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah'.

in turn would consult with al-Mu'izz before offering a response. A number of these letters have been preserved in *Sirat al-Ustadh Jawdhar* ('The Biography of Ustadh Jawdhar'), which was composed some decades later by Jawdhar's own private secretary, Mansur al-Azizi. Divided into two parts, the book first relates the major events of Jawdhar's life – his entry into the service of al-Mahdi, and his service under the sub-sequent three Imam-caliphs. The second part provides a unique archive of 86 letters, recorded conversations and directives, mainly those exchanged between al-Mu'izz and Jawdhar, with some from al-Mansur also. Apparent among them is the deepening personal bond between the elder devotee of the Fatimid house and the young Imam.

In the early years of al-Mu'izz's reign, another Slav (Saqlabi), one much younger, continued his rise through

the Fatimid ranks. Abu'l-Hasan Jawhar al-Siqilli (meaning 'Sicilian', a confusion caused by medieval scribes) had entered into the service of al-Mansur, but it was under al-Mu'izz that he gained a spectacular reputation in Fatimid history as well as in the history of Egypt. Today, a road in modern Cairo carries his name – Jawhar al-Qa'id (Jawhar the Commander).

Little is known about the early years of Jawhar's life, except that, born around the year 924, he was of Slavic origin (like all Saqaliba) and was brought as a slave to Ifriqiya. After being passed between several owners, when he was 24 years old Jawhar entered the service of al-Mansur bi'llah. Impressed with his intellect and aptitude, the Imam-caliph appointed him as his personal scribe (*katib*). Thereafter, Jawhar was often found by al-Mansur's side, especially during the campaigns against Abu Yazid, drafting his letters and attending to other correspondence. Upon their return from the final campaign, and in recognition of his service, Jawhar was freed by the Imam.

Upon al-Mansur's return from battle, a letter was sent to Jawhar, the text of which is available to us. In reward for distinguished service, al-Mansur manumitted Jawhar, granting him a special status:

'Our directive to you, may God protect you, is to comply with disbursing to the poor of Mahdiyya and its surrounding region the alms that we have determined. However, with regard to manumitting, we did not find a deed more pious and more pleasing to God, the Mighty, the Exalted, than manumitting a pure, virtuous, believing slave such as you. Hence you are free for the sake of God, the Magnificent. In anticipation of His

immense reward, I free your body and your spirit in this world and the Hereafter, and to honour you we will designate you as 'Client of the Commander of the Faithful.' Begin your correspondence to everyone, high or low in rank, thus: "From Jawhar, Client of the Commander of the Faithful, to so-and-so son of so-and-so." ... Your name should not be preceded by anyone else's name other than the name of your master Abu Tamim [al-Mu'izz]'.³

Under Imam al-Mu'izz, Jawhar continued in his official role as secretary to the Imam and head of the chancery, overseeing all official documents and decrees. Known as Jawhar *al-Katib* (the Scribe), he became a seasoned bureaucrat and one of the most important men of the realm. However, it was his skill on the battlefield that earned him his place in history.

The Pillars of Law and Governance

During the early reigns of the Imam-caliphs, ideas regarding the role of the state, and the relationship between the ruler and the people, had developed in relation to the world around them. Now, in the reign of al-Mu'izz, the principles of governance and law were codified in one of the most important texts of the Fatimid age.

Since the time of al-Mansur, Qadi al-Nu'man had been stationed at Mansuriyya. In the new courthouse, al-Nu'man passed judgements on cases, while also overseeing the Fatimid judiciary. By the reign of al-Mu'izz, al-Nu'man was also the head of the Ismaili *da'wa* organisation. Known as the *da'i al-du'at* (the chief *da'i*), al-Nu'man was responsible for directing the affairs of the *da'wa* across the Muslim world and for the delivery

of the *majalis* (teaching sessions) at the palace of the Imam. Yet, despite his considerable duties, al-Nu'man continued to produce a prodigious number of scholarly texts.

He had already written the *Kitab al-Idah*, the great collection of the sayings of the *ahl al-bayt*. From then on, he would continue to write treatises on law and jurisprudence, works of poetry, texts on the Prophet and the Imams, and works that engaged in debates with some of the founding members of other schools of thought. His expertise in the traditions of the Prophet and the Imams led him to compose many books on their sayings and stipulations. Amongst these numerous texts, he himself records how he came to write one that would be compact and inexpensive to reproduce:

Some judges, governors and seekers of knowledge had asked me for a work which would provide an abridged exposition of the sayings of the *ahl al-bayt*, which explicates their meaning, facilitates memorisation and is light on the pocket. So I began to write it and I estimated that when the book was complete it would cost no more than a dinar for those who wished to transcribe it. Hence I named it *Kitab al-Dinar* ['The Book of (One) Dinar'] and I mentioned this in the introduction. I presented what I had begun to write to al-Mu'izz. I requested him to peruse the work and to confirm that the traditions were transmitted from him. I sent that with a note in which I made a request. Al-Mu'izz wrote back in his own hand on the reverse of the note:

'In the name of God the Merciful, the Compassionate. May God safeguard you, O Nu'man. I have leafed through and examined the book, and am pleased with the sound traditions and the excellent summation.

However, it contains words which many of our *awliya* ['friends'] would find abstruse, so elucidate them such that they can comprehend them so as to ensure that everyone can grasp the knowledge through the words, whether they are distinguished or commonplace. That way it will become valuable and digestible. Name it *Kitab al-Ikhtisar li sahih al-athar an al-a'imma al-athar* ['An Abridged Work on the Sound Traditions of the Pure Imams']. This is better than calling it *Kitab al-Dinar* because it contains the knowledge of the *awliya Allah* (friends of God) which all people should desire for their souls and not [out of consideration for] their money.⁴

As head of the *da'wa*, Qadi al-Nu'man also wrote some of the most influential works in the Fatimid age on esoteric knowledge (*ta'wil*). His *Asas al-ta'wil*, *Ta'wil al-shari'a* and *Ta'wil al-da'a'im* survived and continue to be studied today. For historians of the Fatimid age, al-Nu'man's historical works provide us with some of the most valuable information on those early days of Fatimid rule. Amongst them is the *Iftitah al-da'wa*, which we have already discussed, covering the early days of the *da'wa*, the emergence of al-Mahdi bi'llah, and the founding of the Fatimid state. In his writings, al-Nu'man mentions his rationale for composing this work, which was prompted by a statement of Imam al-Mu'izz:

Concerning the reports of the reign [*dawla*], those who ruled it and those *da'is* and believers who established it, I would like information on them to be perpetuated in this manner for those who succeed, so that the positive mention of those from bygone times is perpetuated and the prayers of those who succeed them and hear their name are upon them, and so that

those who succeed them know the honour that God has prepared for them in the hereafter.⁵

However, of all al-Nu'man's works one gained foundational status as establishing the Fatimid legal code. Written between 958 and 960, under the guidance of Imam al-Mu'izz, the book *Da'a'im al-Islam* ('Pillars of Islam') outlined the Fatimid legal system. As well as detailing the means by which justice was to be dispensed and social relations moulded, *Da'a'im al-Islam* pronounced on the relationship between the ruler and the people, and thus became known as one of the first 'civic constitutions' of the Fatimid age. The 15th-century Ismaili chronicler Idris Imad al-Din notes that on the eve of its writing, al-Nu'man and other *da'is* sat with Imam al-Mu'izz to discuss issues related to disagreements and disputations between the different schools:

Then al-Mu'izz mentioned the words of the Messenger of God to them: 'If deviation occurs in my community the scholar should manifest his knowledge, or else God's curse will be upon him.' He turned to Qadi al-Nu'man and said, 'You are meant by that, O Nu'man.' Then he instructed him to compose the *Kitab al-Da'a'im*; he confirmed its foundations and divided its sections. He apprised him of the sound traditions from his pure ancestors and from the Messenger of God according to their types and categories, avoiding those that the narrators had disagreed upon and were fabricated. Al-Mu'izz added, 'Indeed, it has been relayed to us from Imam al-Sadiq, Ja'far b. Muhammad, who said, "Islam was founded on seven pillars: *walaya* (devotional obedience), this is the best – through it and through the *wali* [i.e. the Imam] its knowledge can be obtained – purity, prayer, almsgiving,

fasting during the month of Ramadan, pilgrimage to the sacred House of God, and jihad."¹⁶

The Principle of Walaya

In its opening chapters, the *Da'a'im* speaks about the Shi'i principle of *walaya*, a doctrinally significant term giving the broader meaning of allegiance and obedience to the Imam. *Walaya* is considered to be the most important condition of faith (*iman*) and the first of the seven Ismaili pillars of Islam, as explained by Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq in the 8th century.

Following this, the *Da'a'im* continues by providing its most original contribution, the Fatimid Ismaili theory of the imamate. Qadi al-Nu'man confirms the necessity of the imamate, of which only the chosen of the *ahl al-bayt*, namely Ismaili Imams, are holders of office. They are the *ulu'l-amr minkum* ('holders of authority from amongst you') as mentioned in the Qur'an (4:59), the sole repositories of esoteric knowledge and the source of laws, the interpretation of the Imam of each time being above all else. For Qadi al-Nu'man, the Imam is not only vital for righteous rule, but it is through the recognition of the Imam whose knowledge is divinely ordained that God's will is elucidated, and who therefore illuminates the path of guidance and salvation of the believers.

Iman and Islam

When writing about faith (*iman*) and submission to God, Qadi al-Nu'man sets out important principles that accommodate the validity of different Muslim interpretations of Islam. In his text, al-Nu'man emphasised that recognising the rightful Imam of the time, namely, the Fatimid Imam-caliph, was a necessary part of faith.

Only through acceptance of the *walaya*, he asserted, could a person be a believer (*mu'min*). Yet, importantly, following Qur'anic precedents and the traditions of Imams Muhammad al-Baqir and Ja'far al-Sadiq, he distinguished between *iman* (faith) and *islam* (submission). In the *Da'a'im*, he stated that while *iman* is contained within Islam, one can belong to the latter without necessarily belonging to the former. He relayed Imam al-Baqir's imagery of two circles, one contained within the other, to represent the idea.

Therefore, according to the *Da'a'im*, one could follow the common Islamic laws of marriage, inheritance and bloodshed and be a Muslim without being a *mu'min*. While the latter are privileged, the former are not condemned. Rather, the *mu'mins* represent those who have access to the esoteric (*baṭin*) understanding of the faith, while the latter are those who uphold the exoteric (*zahir*) understanding.

The Ahd of Ali

Later in the *Da'a'im*, al-Nu'man reproduces one of the most well-known documents attributed to Imam Ali. The *Ahd* of Ali is a guide to good governance. A similar version is also incorporated in the famous collection of Ali's sermons, the *Nahj al-balagha* ('Path of Eloquence'), where the tradition holds that it was a document written by Imam Ali and sent to his governor of Egypt, Malik al-Ashtar, outlining the responsibilities of good governance. By including it within the *Da'a'im*, a text that functioned as a handbook for governors and judges across the empire, it became part of the civic constitution of the Fatimid state.

The *Ahd* of Ali provides a vision of ideal government and the ordering of society. Directed towards the

governors, the document advises them about their relations with their governing officials as well as their subjects from various classes and groups, noting that each group is reliant on the other. It instructs on principles of good governance and justice as conditions for building a stable and prosperous society. Among the noteworthy features of the *Ahd* is its focus on the satisfaction of the common people (*rida'l-'amma*). Accordingly, the governor is advised, 'Let the acts that are most beloved to you be those that are between the two extremes [of severity and leniency], the most fulfilling of obedience to God and the satisfaction of the common people.'⁷ The document as contained in the *Da'a'im* relates that the people are the source of the state's strength; they are the ones that give it its ability to exercise power and are its defence against enemies. The provision of justice for them is vital for 'it is upon that alone that the welfare of the servants [of God] and countries depends.'⁸

The *Ahd's* idea of a stable political order is based on ensuring peace as well as protecting all segments of the population from harm. Its instruction on the selection of governors and administrators therefore, is based principally on merit and competence, so as to protect the people from, 'nepotism, tyranny, arrogance, cruelty and other human excesses'. By contrast, the *Ahd* presents bad government as that which unleashes tyranny, arrogance, excessive punishment, cruelty and lust for wealth and possessions, and which causes hardship for the poor, making particular reference to the ills of nepotism by those in government.⁹

Significantly, the *Ahd* in the *Da'a'im* makes almost no mention of different communities, whether Shi'i or Sunni, Muslim or non-Muslim; its guidance regarding

the governance of people casts a cloak of protection over all subjects.

Advice to the Kutama

Construction boomed in the city of Mansuriyya during the first decades of the reign of al-Mu'izz. In 959, a vast aqueduct of stone and quarried lime was built. The aqueduct rose on tall pillars approximately 36 kilometres south-west of the capital at the mountain foothills, crossing deep valleys and bringing fresh water to both Qayrawan and Mansuriyya. Meanwhile, a number of new buildings and palaces sprang up over the capital city. It was during this time that al-Mu'izz summoned the senior shaykhs of the Kutama. As relayed by the eminent 15th-century Sunni Egyptian author al-Maqrizi, al-Mu'izz wished to impart the principles of compassionate governance to the leaders of the tribes, and to deter them from an opulent lifestyle:

One cold blustery winter's day in al-Mansuriyya, al-Mu'izz summoned several of the Kutama shaykhs. He ordered them to be admitted into his presence through a door that was not customarily used. He stood in a large, square room, carpeted in felt, wearing a robe over his clothes. Open doors led to a library. In front of him were a raised dais and an inkpot, and he was surrounded by documents. Then he said: 'Our brothers! On this cold winter's day, I woke up and said to the mother of the princes, who is listening to my words right now, "Do you suppose that on a day like this our brothers imagine that we are eating and drinking, adorned in garments embroidered in gold, of brocade, silk and fur of fennec and sable, with musk, song, wine and revelry as people of the world do?" [...]

‘Then I thought of sending for you’, he continued, ‘so that you could see what I do when I am away from you and far from your eyes. My status exceeds yours only because I have responsibility over your affairs on earth and because God has singled me out as your imam. I busy myself with letters that come to me from the east and west, to which I respond in my own hand ... So when you are on your own, O shaykhs, do as I do. Do not be haughty and imperious, lest God withdraw His favour from you and bestow it on others. Show compassion to your subordinates who have no access to me, just as I am compassionate with you. In this manner benevolence may abound, virtue may prevail, and justice may thrive among the people.’¹⁰

This would be but one of the counsels the followers of the Imam received during their visits to the palace, which Qadi al-Nu‘man describes as being ‘much frequented’. Every Friday, the adherents of the Ismaili *da‘wa* walked past the newly dug shimmering artificial lakes of the city to enter the palace of the Imam. Inside one of the great halls, they sat to attend the *majalis al-hikma* (sessions of wisdom), as their own fathers and grandfathers had often done before them. These sessions provided them with learning from the teachings of the Qur’an, the Prophet and the Imams.

Intellectual Ferment in the Early Fatimid Age

By the 950s, much had changed for the communities of Ismaili believers since the years of the *dawr al-satr*, a century earlier. Yet much had also remained the same. Over the first decades of the Fatimid age, the quest for knowledge and the emphasis of learning and education remained central features in the lives of the Ismaili



Figure 19. Fatimid Ivory Casket

Lid of an ivory casket made in Mansuriyya, decorated in floriated Kufic writing featuring a dedication to Imam al-Mu'izz.

faithful. No feature made this more apparent than the early establishment of the *majalis al-hikma* (the teaching sessions of wisdom). Mounting stability and security in the reign of al-Mu'izz further facilitated the expansion of the *da'wa* activities within the Fatimid realms and among the Ismaili communities living across the Muslim world.

In this vein, Imam al-Mu'izz met the leading chiefs of the Kutama to encourage the pursuit of knowledge. When he was told that the Kutama were diligent in gathering together after every Friday prayer to listen to lectures and participate in discussions and debates, he replied:

'This is what we wish from them and others, for it is their fortune, the amelioration of their situation, and the completion of God's favours upon them. ... We wish to make them all luminaries by whom people are guided, beacons who illumine their path with their

light, and the learned ones from whom they acquire knowledge.'¹¹

According to al-Nu'man's eyewitness accounts, the yearning for knowledge that the Imam sought to instil in his followers was something that he himself seems to have felt deeply. The *qadi* writes how al-Mu'izz would regularly engage in a variety of conversations and debates, and that he would often request books and manuscripts to read. In one instance, al-Nu'man writes of the Imam standing in Fatimid palace libraries, reading from one manuscript after another until he felt a sharp pain in his legs. Both al-Mu'izz and his father, al-Mansur, were known to have followed intellectual pursuits keenly.

Education was also considered vital in this age, in the training of bureaucrats and the administrators of government, and particular emphasis was given to instructing the offspring of state officials. Thus, in the *Sirat Jawdhar* we read a reply of al-Mu'izz:

When Nazif al-Rayhani the Secretary died, the Imam [al-Mu'izz] invoked God's mercy upon him. Then the Ustadh [Jawdhar] asked permission to continue to pay the stipends/salary of the father to his son, who was a small child. Our lord [al-Mu'izz] sent him the reply: 'Let Nazif's son be looked after on behalf of his father. If the child is not educated, he will not be useful as an adult ... Take care of him and awaken his mind.'¹²

From the earliest days of the Ismaili *da'wa* in Ifriqiya, participation in the *majalis al-hikma* was a regular occurrence in the lives of its adherents. During the reign of Imam al-Mahdi bi'llah, responsibility for the delivery

of the *majalis* was delegated to Aflah b. Harun al-Malusi, a notably distinguished and gifted *da'i*. Aflah was a native Berber whose erudition led al-Mahdi to appoint him, first, as the chief judge of Tripoli, and thereafter he was promoted to become the *qadi al-qudat* (the chief justice). In a custom that would continue for decades, the chief justice was also appointed *da'i al-du'at*, the chief *da'i*.

The office of the chief *da'i* became one of the most eminent positions in the Fatimid lands, the gateway through which the knowledge and guidance of the Imam was conveyed to the Ismaili faithful. The chief *da'i* was also responsible for the administration of the *da'wa* both within the Fatimid realms and for the communities of Ismailis across the Muslim world. All local and regional *da'is*, who would hold *majalis* of their own for the benefit of their communities, were directed by the chief *da'i*. New *da'is* were trained under his supervision, and would then travel to far-flung regions of the *da'wa*, carrying their scholarly books and texts of the lectures and sermons, to relay the knowledge that they themselves had learnt.

In the time of al-Mahdi, Aflah presented the *majalis al-hikma* in the Fatimid capital of Mahdiyya on a weekly basis. Ibn al-Haytham's first-hand account notes that the presence of women in the *majalis* was commonplace, as was the participation of people from different walks of life, including shepherds, labourers and carpenters. He also notes that Aflah would tailor his lessons to make them relevant to his audience:

I listened to him ... while he was performing his missionary function among women and using allusions for them in his sermon that their intelligence

could grasp and that impressed themselves upon them, for he used to say: 'God disposes of the appropriate argument [Quran, VI:149]; it is the one with which he addresses the knowing person according to his knowledge and the unknowing person only within the limits of his understanding.' He had the habit, when talking to women, to choose as examples finery or the finger ring. ... To the artisan he spoke about his respective trade; to the tailor, for instance, about needle and thread, eyelet and scissors; to the shepherd about his staff and wrap, and the flock and the shepherd's pouch.¹³

Aflah al-Malusi died sometime before 923 during the reign al-Mahdi. Decades later, another chief *da'i*, the esteemed Qadi al-Nu'man, began a career whose legacy is still felt today. Much of the teachings of *hikma* (wisdom) attributed to the first four Fatimid Imams has been transmitted primarily through the writings of Qadi al-Nu'man. He writes how before delivering a *majlis*, he would submit his lectures in written form to Imam al-Mansur, and only when they had been corrected and confirmed, would he proceed to deliver them to his audience.

When al-Mu'izz succeeded his father, al-Mansur, in 953, Qadi al-Nu'man was reconfirmed in his position as the chief *da'i*, with the Imam guiding his scholarship:

'When the Commander of the Faithful al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah opened the gate of mercy for the believers and turned his attention to his followers by his benefaction and grace, he gave me books on esoteric knowledge [*'ilm al-batin*] and instructed me to read out from them in a session every Friday at the palace, which during his lifetime was much frequented.'¹⁴

The *majalis* at al-Mu'izz's palace became increasingly popular, and believers gathered there every Friday after the communal prayers. But the growing numbers in the palace halls soon created their own challenges. Al-Nu'man writes: 'People thronged to it [the *majlis*] and the place became crowded ... [The] overcrowding resulted in poor audibility, with many believers spilling into the palace forecourt; consequently, those who were at the back were unable to hear.'¹⁵ A suggestion was made that a separate *majlis* could be held for those who were less knowledgeable, but some people were affronted by this, feeling that they were being reprimanded for their lack of expertise. When the matter came to the Imam, he ordered al-Nu'man to allow everyone to attend, telling the *qadi* that a 'container when empty and placed correctly will receive the water according to its volume, capacity and size, large or small'.¹⁶

Even in the realms beyond the Fatimid Empire, Ismailis located thousands of miles away from the capital would soon, during the reign of al-Mu'izz, begin to feel the ripples of the re-invigorated *da'wa*.

Seeds of Tension with the Umayyads of Andalusia

In the year 955, the third year of al-Mu'izz's reign, a Fatimid ship sailed from Sicily heading towards the Fatimid mainland. On-board was a leather pouch which contained correspondence intended for the Imam-caliph alone. But a larger vessel, belonging to the Umayyad caliphs of Andalusia, intercepted and attacked the Fatimid ship, on what was seemingly a routine journey, and seized the correspondence. Marooned on a small island, the Fatimid sailors watched helplessly as their adversaries sailed into the horizon and on to Spain.

News quickly reached the Fatimid court of the attack on the Sicilian ship, and the young Imam-caliph al-Mu'izz turned to one of his father's most trusted generals to lead the pursuit. Al-Hasan b. Ali al-Kalbi, veteran of the wars against Abu Yazid and the Byzantines, took to the sea once again, this time leading the Fatimid fleet towards Andalusia.

By the middle of the 9th century, Andalusia had been under Muslim rule for over 200 years. The land came to reflect a rich cultural, religious and ethnic diversity, with Christians, Jews and Muslims cohabiting in relative harmony, such that the era came to be upheld by later historians as the *Convivencia*, the period of coexistence.

At the time of the Fatimids' emergence in Ifriqiya, the Umayyads had reigned over Andalusia for over 150 years. The renowned city of Cordoba, the Umayyad capital, was a magnet for scholars and poets, entrepreneurs and artisans, a melting pot of ideas. The Umayyad *amir* Abd al-Rahman III began his reign aged only 23, and ruled for almost half a century, overlapping with the early years of al-Mahdi bi'llah and continuing until the reign of al-Mu'izz. His reign, from 912 to 961, is considered to be the glorious period of Umayyad rule in Spain.

Relations between the Umayyads of Spain and the Fatimids of Ifriqiya inherited the age-old hostility between the clans of the Banu Umayya and Banu Hashim, between Ali b. Abi Talib and his sons and Mu'awiya and his clan. The history of hostility that had begun centuries earlier in Arabia now continued in the western reaches of the Muslim world, and would be heightened with the spread of the Fatimid *da'wa* in Andalusia.

Fatimid *Da'wa* Activity in Andalusia

Soon after the inception of Fatimid rule in Ifriqiya, a ship set off for Muslim Spain carrying two Fatimid *da'is*, one of whom we know was the *da'i* Ibn al-Haytham. He writes about his journey in his *Kitab al-Munazarat*, and mentions the purpose of this visit: 'What we planted with those people and the inhabitants of Cordoba, was with regard to the superiority of Ali b. Abi Talib, the Commander of the Faithful, may God's blessings be upon him, and the excellence of the family of Muhammad.'¹⁷

After mooring alongside the Andalusian coast, the *da'is* made their way to the court of Umar b. Hafsun. Though his origins are shrouded in mystery, Ibn Hafsun, a native of Andalusia, had launched a rebellion against Umayyad rule in 880, marshalling many locals to his side. Not long after the arrival of the *da'is*, Ibn Hafsun proclaimed his allegiance to the Fatimid Imam-caliph al-Mahdi. It is unclear how long this allegiance continued, or what Ibn Hafsun's religious leanings were, but within a decade, he had switched his allegiance back to the Umayyads.

For the Umayyad ruler Abd al-Rahman III, the establishment of the Fatimid caliphate in Ifriqiya was of grave concern. Above all, the Fatimid claim to the imamate and the caliphate undermined his own authority, and within a short period of time, he reacted decisively.

From the 750s, the Umayyads of Andalusia had used only the title *amir* (or 'emir'), meaning 'commander' or 'prince', not calling themselves caliphs despite regarding the Abbasid caliphs in Baghdad as usurpers. But in 929, having spent more than ten years establishing his

control over southern Spain, Abd al-Rahman III took on the mantle of caliph. He adopted the regnal title *al-Nasir li-Din Allah* ('the One who is Victorious by God'). With the Abbasids and Fatimids, and now the Umayyads, there now arose the exceptional situation of three rival caliphates across the Muslim world.

It was during this time that another Fatimid *da'i*, known as Hani b. Sa'dun, who had been living in Cordoba as a merchant, took up residence in Seville. There around 934, the *da'i*'s son Muhammad was born, and his gift for poetry quickly became apparent. From his early years, the young son of the *da'i* turned his pen to satirising the Umayyad ruler. Soon, it became untenable for him to remain in Andalusia. Aged 24, Muhammad b. Hani crossed the Mediterranean. In time, he would settle at al-Mansuriyya and begin a glittering career as the court poet of the Fatimid Imam-caliph al-Mu'izz. During his lifetime, and to this day, Ibn Hani was recognised as being among the greatest Arab poets of medieval North Africa, his poems circulating widely amongst the peoples of the Fatimid Empire and to the lands beyond. Forever he would retain the name of his home country, widely known as Ibn Hani al-Andalusi.

Fatimids and Umayyads at War and Peace

During the earlier decades of Fatimid rule, the Fatimids and the Umayyads rarely came into direct conflict, despite the proximity of the borders of their empires. Rather, both sides waged war by proxy in the western lands of the Maghrib, that is, present-day Morocco. There, the Umayyads gave financial and military support to different tribes and factions, notably

assisting the Khariji rebel Abu Yazid in his fight against the Fatimids. In turn, the Fatimids supported those tribes and chieftains who patronised their cause.

But the pact between the Umayyads and Byzantines in 949 for the first time had ushered in a new phase of direct confrontation. To match Byzantine encroachments on Sicily, the Umayyads themselves led assaults against the farthest Maghrib, establishing control over a number of coastal cities.

Named by the Umayyad Caliph 'Abd al-Rahman III as *al-Mariyya* ('the Watchtower'), the port of Almeria in Spain – which today retains the same name – was a jewel of the Umayyad dynasty, invested in heavily by the Umayyads in their own desire to dominate the Mediterranean. It was here that the Umayyad vessel with the stolen correspondence had docked, and here al-Hasan al-Kalbi soon followed in pursuit. The sea reflected the orange flares of fire as battle erupted at the port. The Fatimid navy emerged victorious, burning not only the ship but much of the port itself, before al-Hasan al-Kalbi sailed home.

By 956, outright warfare had commenced; the fertile regions around Tabarqa, a town on the northern shores of the Fatimid realms, saw seaborne raids by the Umayyad fleets, who soon continued down the Fatimid coastline. In 958, a new military campaign was devised at the Fatimid court to win back the western regions of North Africa from Umayyad control and restore them to Fatimid rule. To lead the army, al-Mu'izz chose his own trusted scribe, the Saqlabi Abu'l-Hasan Jawhar al-Siqilli. Some doubtless resented this choice. Elder and noble shaykhs of the Kutama may not have been enthused about being led by a Slav who had started

his career as a slave. Al-Mu'izz met the commanders before their departure and reiterated a singular message, that loyalty to the faith and to the Imam outweighed loyalty to tribe or ethnicity. Al-Nu'man was present at the farewell, and he recounts the Imam praising the Kutama for their long history of service to the Fatimid Imams. Then al-Mu'izz spoke about the appointment of Jawhar:

'[P]eople need a leader to thrive. Hence, I have appointed someone who is known to you – that is Jawhar. I designate him over you on my behalf and I place him among you to be my eyes and ears, although each one of you is capable of monitoring yourself. ... Be good to each other and to those who accompany you. Treat the slaves whom I am sending with you as your brothers. Unite with them, as they are your support and strength. Your loyalty to me unites you to them; so do not distinguish between you and them. May God grant you good companionship and sound leadership.'¹⁸

The great expedition to the western edge of North Africa set off. Between the years 958 and 960, Jawhar and the Kutama brought the furthestmost limits of the North African lands back into the Fatimid fold. When he reached the shores of the Atlantic, Jawhar had live fish from the Atlantic placed in clay pots and sent back to Mansuriyya as a symbol of the extent of Fatimid rule – all the way to the shores of the Atlantic. Al-Mu'izz's trust in the young Jawhar was not misplaced. From then on, Jawhar was referred to as 'al-Qa'id Jawhar' (Commander Jawhar). Despite this major

achievement, Jawhar's successes had not yet peaked. The culminating achievements of his career and the greatest of his conquests were still to come.

* * *

The reassertion of Fatimid control over the western Maghrib inevitably caused consternation at the Umayyad court in Spain. Soon thereafter, diplomatic channels were activated. The Umayyad caliph sent a trusted individual with a letter, seeking peace and an alliance against the Byzantines; the sending of an official ambassador would have been unacceptable to both sides. Once again, al-Nu'man was present to record al-Mu'izz's response to the envoy, wherein the long and bitter rivalry between the Alid forefathers of al-Mu'izz and the ancestors of the Umayyads from the time of the Prophet Muhammad found allusion:

Concerning his [the Umayyad caliph's] anxiety about warfare, strife and the shedding of blood, he need not be anxious as he has not witnessed anything from us in this regard to concern him ... While he claims that he is the Commander of the Faithful, the only one of his ancestors to be so called, according to his claim and presumption ... we say: Only we are deserving of this; neither he nor anyone else. We consider that God obligated us to oppose anyone else who presumes and claims this apart from us. Aside from what exists between our ancestors and his ancestors, what occurred between our fathers and his fathers, in the distant times and in the present time – that ancient, original enmity and hostility ... how can a settlement that he has mentioned be reached after such devastating events?¹⁹

In view of these developments, the now established Fatimid court poet, Muhammad b. Hani, penned verses to mark the event:

The Umayyads have been frustrated in what they sought from him [al-Mu'izz], just as hair combs are frustrated by a bald man's head.

Enraged, they sought the stars from the lowest earth through deception, but they ended up far away from the reach of their goals ...

O you who are the most excellent from among all peoples,

Arabs and non-Arabs, and from among the young and old of the family of Ahmad [i.e., Muhammad].

May this victory be salubrious, not because I heard of it nor am I presuming upon the will of God,

But I am optimistic, and fate has a way of being victorious; God extends hopes [for us], and thus in turn they are extended [to us].²⁰

While the confrontation between the Fatimids and the Umayyads was somewhat pacified, wider rivalries had gathered pace in the central regions of the Mediterranean, with Sicily becoming the focus of a sustained struggle between Fatimid and Byzantine forces.

Fatimid Influence Expands Eastwards to Sind

Elsewhere, in the easternmost reaches of the Muslim world – where lie the ancient towns and cities of Iran, Khurasan and the lands beyond the Oxus river – the fortunes of Ismaili communities during the decades that followed the *dawr al-satr* and continuing through the 900s had also met with both triumph and tragedy.

Ever since the schism within the Ismaili *da'wa* between those who accepted al-Mahdi bi'llah as Imam and those who did not, the Ismaili communities of the east had charted their own course. However, during the reign of al-Mu'izz, a reconciliation between some of these Ismaili communities took place. A large number of the eastern Ismailis, under their *da'is*, responded to the outstretched hand of Imam al-Mu'izz and entered the Fatimid fold, having been estranged for many decades. Earlier, the eastern Ismailis had come under the direction and guidance of some of the greatest scholars of the *da'wa* in the Iranian world.

Abu Hatim al-Razi (d. 934) was based in the city of Rayy (south of modern-day Tehran), and was known for his eloquence, knowledge of prophetic traditions and command of language. But above all, he was famed as a philosopher. As a leader of the eastern Ismaili *da'wa*, he taught and inspired his followers, and encouraged the spread of the Ismaili *da'wa* through the Iranian lands, summoning people to pledge their allegiance to the awaited Imam and the *mahdi*. Among the intellectuals and aristocrats of Iranian society, the *da'i* found an eager audience, attracted to a faith based on intellectual pursuit and the ideals of equity and justice. In al-Razi's time, the *da'wa* spread to the regions of Isfahan, Azerbaijan and Gurgan. Soon, many notable members of Iranian society responded to the invitation, including the governor of the city of Rayy himself.

Further to the east, the famed *da'i* Muhammad al-Nasafi also found a receptive audience, especially amongst the senior figures of the native Samanid dynasty, the semi-autonomous rulers in Khurasan and

Transoxania. Al-Nasafi's fame lay in his philosophical articulations, where he proved most adept in integrating the Neoplatonic ideas of late antiquity into the Ismaili thought of his day.

While both these *da'is* were Ismaili, they had remained independent of the Fatimids, and had held back from giving their allegiance to the Fatimid Imam-caliphs. The success of the eastern Ismaili *da'wa* brought its own challenges. While al-Razi was able to move from one place to another to avoid such attacks, al-Nasafi was less fortunate. Scholars who expressed outright enmity to the Ismailis gained influence at the Samanid court, and al-Nasafi was executed in the city of Bukhara in the year 943. Yet the communities of Ismailis persevered, and the execution of al-Nasafi coincided with the rise of one of the most illustrious and intellectually able Ismaili *da'is* of the eastern world, who would conceptualise a philosophical system in which the doctrine of the imamate would find a new articulation.

Abu Ya'qub al-Sijistani (d. after 971) became the leading *da'i* of Khurasan in 943. Continuing the philosophical legacy of his predecessors, al-Sijistani would become a prolific writer and noted thinker of the Ismaili *da'wa*, and it was under him that one of the most significant developments in the history of the eastern Ismaili communities would occur.

Sometime around 960, al-Mu'izz's policy of reconciliation and rapprochement between different Ismaili communities bore fruit. Abu Ya'qub al-Sijistani accepted al-Mu'izz's claim to the imamate, and many of his followers did likewise. Much of the angst of the schism 60 years earlier was thus gradually healed, as entire

communities of Ismailis from Khurasan, Sijistan and Makran, in eastern Iran, and other parts of Central Asia, gave their allegiance to the Fatimid Ismaili Imam-caliph.

If the Imam and nobles at the Fatimid court received the news about affairs of the *da'wa* in the east with some delight, it was not for the first time. Some two years earlier, around the year 958, the Fatimid *da'wa* had established links in another of the eastern regions, links which remain deep and firm until the present day.

* * *

The region of Sind (encompassing the present province of Punjab in Pakistan), is located along the course of the Indus, a river which has for thousands of years fostered the growth of civilisation on its banks. By the 10th century, Sind functioned as a border region and zone of confluence between the Muslim civilisations of Iran and those of the Indian subcontinent to the east. Within the province lay the city of Multan, then one of the wealthiest of the region and a site of pilgrimage. Decades earlier, Ismaili *da'is* from Yemen under the direction of Ibn Hawshab had disembarked there after their short sea journey. They initiated the message of the *da'wa*, and now, during the reign of al-Mu'izz, it began to take root. Around 958, the prince of Multan accepted the *da'wa* and took the oath of allegiance to the Fatimid Imam. Thereafter, the name of the Fatimid Imam-caliph al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah was inscribed on the banners that fluttered over the city and proclaimed in the communal prayers.

The distance between Multan and the city of Man-suriyya was over 5,000 miles (or 8,000 km). News travelled slowly, but when it arrived at the Fatimid court,

Qadi al-Nu'man was present to record the scene. Standing in the audience when the message came, he wrote how he saw al-Mu'izz's face beam, and reported what the Imam said to them:

They (the messengers) [from Sind] mentioned that God has increased the number of the people who profess our *da'wa* and those who are close to us are in support of them. ... God has enlightened one of the rulers of that region who is endowed with power, provisions, weapons and men, and he has responded to the *da'wa* along with his people and he has joined the party of believers. Their position is such that they have publicly declared [the *da'wa*]. They have proclaimed my name and have given it renown; they have inscribed it on banners and have pronounced it from the *minbars* ['pulpits'].²¹

On account of the bond between the Fatimid palace in al-Mansuriyya and the burgeoning Ismaili community in Sind, lines of communication between the Imam and his new adherents were established. *Da'is* travelled to and fro, carrying the texts of the *da'wa* and the guidance of the Imam, and returning with the letters and religious dues of the believers. Some seven years later, in 965, al-Mu'izz wrote a long letter to the *da'i* Halam b. Shayban, who was then the head of the Fatimid *da'wa* in Sind. Along with the letter, he dispatched seven of the famous white Fatimid banners. In that land far away, the banners flew emblazoned with the blessings (*baraka*) of the Imam himself. The white banners of the Fatimids became noted symbols of the authority of the Ismaili Imam-caliphs. Before long, they would also come to flutter over the banks of the river Nile.

The Grand Fatimid Circumcision Ceremony

In the year 962, grand public ceremonies were held in the Fatimid capital al-Mansuriyya and all across the realm. In size and scope, nothing of their like had been seen before. They brought the people of the empire together to perform one of the most ancient of monotheistic rituals: that of circumcision, which is believed to have been initiated by Abraham. The ritual bound the people by the Abrahamic covenant, between God and the community, a covenant which – for the followers of the Fatimids – was inherited by al-Mu'izz. Moreover, the circumcision ceremonies served as occasions for the distribution of wealth among the people.

Back in May 955, al-Mu'izz had celebrated the birth of his third son, Nizar. His court was already in



Figure 20. Fustat Coin

An example of one of the first Fatimid coins issued after their conquest of Egypt. This is dated to 969 and would have been minted in Fustat. The inner circle reads, 'There is no god but God, Muhammad is the Messenger of God', while the middle circle reads, 'and Ali is the most excellent of God's *wasīs* and the *wazīr* of the best of messengers'. On the outer circle is inscribed verse 33 from Sura 9. The reverse of the coin bears the name *al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah*.

a jubilant mood as a Fatimid naval expedition had just defeated a joint Umayyad and Byzantine assault. The joy of victory multiplied with news of the birth of the new Fatimid prince; this was the one to whom the *nass* would eventually be passed. At that time, al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah already had two sons. Tamim, after whom al-Mu'izz was called by the patronym *Abu Tamim*, was six years old. Over time, he would become one of the most noted poets of the Fatimid age. Abd Allah was the second son of



Figure 21. Al-Azhar Mosque

A view from the minaret of al-Azhar mosque, photographed in 2016. Founded in 969, al-Azhar has served continuously as a major centre of learning and a renowned place of worship to this day. Rulers and notables of subsequent dynasties often patronised additions to the mosque, including new domes and minarets, as gestures of piety. Many of the original Fatimid features of the mosque, including its outline, the courtyard, the main entrance portal and dome leading into the sanctuary, as well as some of its interior inscriptions and decorative plaster work, still remain.

al-Mu'izz, and in due course he became a noted Fatimid general. And not long after Nizar's birth, al-Mu'izz fathered a fourth son, Aqil.

When Nizar b. al-Mu'izz was seven years old, the beginning of the great ceremonial was announced. The three younger sons of al-Mu'izz were included in the ritual, and the Imam-caliph made public his intention that all other boys not yet circumcised should be invited. The festive ceremonies lasted for an entire month, with costs covered by the state, and everyone eligible to participate in the ritual was paid to do so. It is reported that tens of thousands of circumcisions were performed across the Fatimid realm, with some 12,000 carried out on the final day.

On 8 April 962 the ceremonies began. The main venue was the palace courtyard beside the lake. There, families from across the capital city, from Qayrawan, and the surrounding regions came to join in. First, al-Mu'izz oversaw the circumcisions of his own sons; he then witnessed the circumcision of other boys of the realm. Qadi al-Nu'man, who attended the ceremonies himself, notes:

The circumcisers were in the tents sitting on chairs with benches in front of them for the boys to sit on. People held their boys on their laps, sprinkling the powder that stemmed the bleeding from the circumcised parts and [some] would be standing with incense and rosewater spraying it on their heads and faces to alleviate their fear, and the clowns had toys to entertain them and divert their attention. Then they would celebrate as they left to take them home.²²

The ceremonies at al-Mansuriyya were replicated in all the major urban centres across the Fatimid lands. To

all the participants, rewards were given, a set amount for rural dwellers, and 100–200 dirhams for city-dwelling families of the boys taking part, aimed, as Qadi al-Nu'man relates, at alleviating the financial cares of the poor.

The New Kalbid Generations

Sometime after 964, Imam-caliph al-Mu'izz received a letter from Jawdhar. The minister was writing on behalf of a family to whom he was particularly close, and for whom he knew the Imam had great regard. As related in the *Sirat al-Ustadh Jawdhar*, Jawdhar wrote to relay a request by the mother of al-Hasan al-Kalbi, 'to be allowed to buy a house close to the



Figure 22. Al-Azhar Entrance to the Prayer-Hall

The Fatimid entrance porch to the royal passage of al-Azhar mosque, photographed in 2016. Built as the main entrance from the courtyard into the covered prayer-hall, the raised roof and dome indicate the passage-way through which the Imam-caliphs proceeded towards the prayer-niche at the far end.

palace of the Commander of the Faithful because of the blessing associated within it'. The Imam-caliph's reply was recorded: 'With regard to the mother of al-Hasan, may God be satisfied with him, and the request she has submitted, by God, if she had asked us to lodge her in our palace, it would have been easy and proper. We shall grant her especially the one request that she has asked.'²³

Al-Hasan b. Ali al-Kalbi, the veteran general and governor of Sicily, had already gained renown during the reigns of al-Mansur, and his star shone brighter after his victory at Almeria against the Umayyad fleet. In the reign of al-Mu'izz, the reputation and rank of al-Hasan's brothers, sons and nephews were similarly to ascend as a new generation of Kalbids came to the fore. Al-Hasan's brother Ammar b. Ali emerged as admiral of the Sicilian fleet. Ammar's own son, also called al-Hasan, rapidly rose through the ranks of the Fatimid army and would soon win fame on his own account. Most esteemed among them would be the elder al-Hasan al-Kalbi's son Ahmad, who would be appointed as governor of Sicily in his father's stead.

A unique and somewhat unusual source on the Kalbids is the *Sira* of Jawdhar, as the latter was one of the intimate friends and patrons of the family. It relates how from the earlier decades of Fatimid history, the Ustadh was tasked by Imam-caliph al-Qa'im to look after al-Hasan and his brothers when their father died. The *Sira* similarly notes the controversies within the Kalbid household as the new generations suffered from internal rivalries and external competitors. In response to one such conspiracy, the *Sira* records that al-Mu'izz wrote to Jawdhar to warn him of conspirators and ordered



Figure 23. Coin of al-Mu'izz

A coin dated to 974, after the settlement of Imam al-Mu'izz in Egypt. Minted in Egypt with the name *al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah* inscribed.

him 'to take care of them as you took care of their father before them.'

The ascent of the Kalbids was already under way during the early years of al-Mu'izz's reign. However, it was during the escalating contestations over Sicily between the Fatimids and the Byzantines that the next generation of Kalbids were to earn their accolades.

Relations with the Byzantine Empire

From the palace window of his great-grandfather, Imam-caliph al-Mu'izz could see the tall sails of the flotilla being built in the harbour at al-Mahdiyya. He had come to personally oversee the preparations. The arsenal and warehouses built by al-Mahdi decades earlier were in full view, and the work continued, with new ships being built as others set sail. In 956, news had already reached the Fatimid capital of the armada of Byzantine ships sailing around the Italian mainland, heading towards Sicily. To meet this challenge, the Imam-caliph bade

farewell to the sailors at al-Mahdiyya as the sails once more disappeared on the horizon and headed towards the island.

The Byzantines were known as *al-Rum* in Arabic, just as they too called themselves 'Romans', the successors to the great Roman Empire. From their capital, the famed city of Constantinople (today's Istanbul), Byzantine emperors ruled over lands that stretched eastwards across Anatolia to the borders of Syria, and westwards through Thrace (south-eastern Balkans) and Macedonia, including also the cities of Greece and the southern regions of the Italian peninsula. When the Fatimids began to extend their rule along the Mediterranean Sea, it was over the central and western regions that they clashed with the Byzantines, particularly over the control of Sicily and southern Italy.

Over the first decades of the Fatimid state's existence, relations between the Fatimids and Byzantines vacillated between bursts of warfare and periods of long truce. Byzantine merchant ships docked regularly in Fatimid ports, and the Mediterranean continued to serve as a conduit of exchange as it had done since the emergence of Mediterranean civilisations.

Now, during the reign of al-Mu'izz, warfare broke out once again over the control of Sicily and the central Mediterranean, leading to some of the most intensely fought naval encounters of the period. For ten years, between 955 and 965, the coasts of Ifriqiya and especially of Sicily and Italy became scenes of naval warfare, and sites of two of the most famous Fatimid-Byzantine battles, as contestation over the Mediterranean escalated.

As governor of Sicily, Ahmad b. al-Hasan al-Kalbi was acutely aware that the amassing of Byzantine forces in

Italy signalled a major assault on the island. Ahmad's own father and uncle were sent by the Fatimid sovereign as reinforcements to Sicily. In 956, two major Fatimid fleets set sail from Ifriqiya towards Sicily. The elder al-Hasan al-Kalbi, father of Ahmad, stood at the helm of one fleet, while the other was led by his younger brother Ammar. In 957, al-Hasan's own fleet was defeated by the intrepid Byzantine admiral Basil, and his brother Ammar's armada was wrecked by the tumultuous sea. When in 958 Ammar sought to join his brother in a battle against the Byzantines, he lost his life in the turbulent sea. These years of naval warfare took their toll on both sides, and a turn to negotiations was favoured.

In 958, standing by the Imam-caliph al-Mu'izz, alongside other senior figures of the Fatimid court, Qadi al-Nu'man awaited the ambassador of the Byzantine Empire in the lavish audience hall of the Fatimid palace. This visit was but the latest of the many envoys from Constantinople, across the Mediterranean Sea, since the inception of Fatimid rule. The Byzantine ambassador had come to negotiate terms for peace. Al-Nu'man writes:

The envoy who came to al-Mu'izz was one of the Byzantine patriarchs and a nobleman, a messenger from ... the ruler of Constantinople ... He came bearing a large number of gifts including gold and silver vessels studded with jewels, silk and brocade, and among them other articles that were precious and a letter from the sender offering submission to the Commander of the Faithful, beseeching him to cease fighting and seeking peace. He also sent a large number of released prisoners from the East, which no previous Byzantine oppressor had ever

sent to any of the Maghribi [Northwest African] rulers nor to any of the Imams prior to al-Mu'izz.²⁴

After much discussion, a five-year truce was agreed. But it proved short lived.

Almost two years later, in the summer of 960, a large Byzantine naval force landed on the island of Crete. Known in Arabic as 'Iqritish', Crete had for more than a century-and-a-half been a Muslim territory. Although the Muslims of Crete had not given their allegiance to the Fatimids, the naval warfare led them to ask al-Mu'izz for help. The Fatimid navy was prepared, and a letter was despatched to the Byzantine emperor:

Do you not know that thus far the people of Crete used to give allegiance to others, but now they have turned to us and have sought our help? In order to continue the pact with us, it is incumbent upon you to let them be, and to cease opposing them.²⁵

To restore Muslim rule to the island, al-Mu'izz reached out to the Abbasid governors of Egypt, who then belonged to the Ikhshidid dynasty. A joint alliance was proposed, but ultimately it came to naught as the Byzantines swiftly completed their conquest of Crete. Warfare broke out once more, and seven years would pass before a new era of peace was restored. But during that time, Sicily became firmly established as part of the Fatimid realms.

Kalbid Sicily Thrives

In the year 962, the governor of Sicily, Ahmad, son of al-Hasan al-Kalbi, sailed to Ifriqiya. Alongside the governor travelled a number of Sicilian nobles. Together,

they rode to the Fatimid capital al-Mansuriyya. Undoubtedly, much discussion was held concerning the Byzantine frontiers. But, probably in the halls of the Imam's palace, Ahmad and his companions took the oath of allegiance for entry into the Ismaili *da'wa*. Within a few months, they returned to their island. Newly entrusted, the governor Ahmad would spend the rest of 962 as the vanguard of Fatimid battles against resurgent Byzantine forces.

The Byzantine assault on Crete in 960 triggered a new Fatimid-Byzantine war, one that came to determine the boundaries between the two empires for decades to come. For five years, between 960 and 965, the north-east of Sicily became the site of intense warfare.

By 962, the city of Taormina in the north-east of the island remained as one of the last bastions of Greek rule in Sicily. As a locus of Greek power and Byzantine aid, it was besieged by the newly returned governor Ahmad al-Kalbi. When he entered the city at the end of December, he renamed it *al-Mu'izziya*, presumably in honour of his new entry into the *da'wa*. But there remained one major Greek stronghold on the Sicilian coast, and here lay the focus of a major Byzantine response by one of Byzantium's ablest emperors.

Few figures of the Byzantine Empire matched the reputation of Nicephorus Phocas. The strategic mindset of this scion of a famous military family was clearly evident when he led the assault on Crete in 960, succeeding where many before him had failed. His fame only increased when he won a string of victories in Muslim Syria, including the brief capture of Aleppo, laying claim to new regions for the Byzantine realms. In 963, Nicephorus filled the void created by the

premature death of the previous Byzantine ruler and proclaimed himself regent of the Byzantine realms. Just one year later, he put into action his major campaign to seize Sicily once and for all. By 964, more than 40,000 soldiers from across the Byzantine lands marched westwards for a final reconquest of Sicily. Over the next two years, two battles decided the future of Sicily for the next century.

The grand Byzantine army landed in north-eastern Sicily in 964. To confront them came the new generations of Kalbid generals, Ahmad b. al-Hasan and his cousin al-Hasan b. Ammar. Around volcanic mountain-tops and ravines in the north-east of the island, the famous Battle of the Pit took place between Fatimid and Byzantine forces. Although the Byzantine forces were routed, there was to be a further confrontation. From Mansurriya, al-Mu'izz dispatched the general al-Hasan al-Kalbi, now aged, to help his son and nephew in the final onslaught.

Between Italy and Sicily lay a narrow strait of water. Here, the final naval battle of this phase was to take place. The Battle of the Straits saw the governor Ahmad b. al-Hasan line up against the Byzantine navy. The chroniclers describe in detail the course of the pitched battle that followed, including Ahmad's use of underwater divers to set fire to Byzantine boats. Fires racked the Byzantine fleet and catastrophic defeat ensued, including the capture of their general.

The two battles, those of the Pit and the Straits, led to a clear outcome. Nicephorus Phocas once again sued for peace, and the boundaries between Fatimid and Byzantine realms were set for years to come. Just as Sicily was to remain Fatimid, the Kalbid family of Sicily had firmly established their roots and would last well

into the next century, until 1053. They ushered in what became the golden age of Muslim Sicily.

* * *

The visit of the well-travelled geographer Ibn Hawqal to Sicily came during this golden age. Ahmad b. al-Hasan al-Kalbi ruled until 970, and after a brief interlude, Imam al-Mu'izz appointed Ahmad's younger brother, Ali b. al-Hasan al-Kalbi, as his successor. On the fertile island, the peace-treaties between the Fatimids and Byzantines brought renewed prosperity. By the reign of al-Mu'izz, the long spate of building and investment bore fruit as a 'green revolution', echoing similar developments across other areas of the Islamic world.

All across Sicily in the latter half of the 10th century, workers, engineers and architects took to the earth, toiling and building upon the rich, black soil. New canals were dug, either to redirect rivers and streams into farmlands and to power watermills or to bring cool water from deep beneath the soil to sustain the peoples of the cities. Of the words of Arabic origin in today's Sicilian dialect, a number still relate to the hydraulic practices introduced during these years. New fruits and plants, including sumac, mulberries, papyrus and henna were brought to the island by enterprising landowners, and among the extensive legacies of Fatimid-Kalbid rule in Sicily, one is the lemon.

Across the Mediterranean world, Sicily became a centre of trade, a conduit particularly between Italy, Ifriqiya and the eastern Mediterranean. The earlier Fatimid Imam-caliphs had issued a special coin for the island to encourage trade across its varied markets and economies, one that gained currency across the Italian coast.

In 967, Imam-caliph al-Mu'izz ordered a large-scale building programme to accompany the agricultural reforms. The governor, Ahmad al-Kalbi, was instructed not only to fortify Palermo but also to install administrators for major building projects across the island. In each province, new urban areas were constructed as centres of the local villages, with every one featuring a mosque.

By the time Ibn Hawqal visited, six years later, Sicily was thriving. Having already seen much of the Islamic world, he alighted in Sicily in the year 973. In his famous book the *Surat al-ard*, the chapter on Sicily begins with an account of the great walls of Palermo, the rivers that ran beneath its gates, and the springs from where people drank, both around the old city and the *Khalisa*. However, when he described the new districts that had grown up around the city, he went into great detail in naming the types of market: markets for fishmongers and butchers, others for fruits and vegetable sellers, and yet others for spice-merchants and olive-sellers. So, too, he described the markets for manufactured goods, those of blacksmiths, embroiderers, rope-makers, tanners, carpenters, woodworkers and joiners. Amidst them all, potters and cotton-merchants sold their wares, and the scents of perfume-sellers filled the air.

Curiously, the traveller made disparaging comments about the nature of the society that he encountered. Perhaps, having been born in a rather homogenous eastern land, he regarded the eclectic society that had developed in Sicily after more than a century of close intermingling between the Christian and Muslim populations as an aberration. He wrote about the widespread intermarriage between the two communities, and bemoaned the 'strange' Arabic dialect that ensued from these

familial interactions. He also recorded his exasperation with a local prayer-leader on his odd conjugation of Arabic verbs. Nonetheless, his writings reveal a highly diverse society. In time, this unique blend of Christian and Muslim, Greek and Arabic cultures exemplified the inter-racial, inter-ethnic and inter-religious societies that the Mediterranean milieu tended to engender. In the following century, this was tangibly manifest as Fatimid art mingled with that of the Normans, of Viking origin, when Sicily came under the sway of a new dynasty.

* * *

In 967, soon after the Battles of the Pit and of the Straits, al-Mu'izz, while riding on horseback, received news of the Fatimid victory over the Byzantines. As relayed by the medieval chronicler Idris Imad al-Din, the Imam descended from his horse and touched his forehead to the ground in prostration, in gratitude to God. News of his action spread far through the rhyming verses of a young poet, Muhammad b. Hani al-Andalusi:

A day extensive and lengthy in pride wherein stands an
endless array of brilliance and ornament,

[A day] that dispels the darkened horizon and
makes good a sickly age

... By God, how excellent was the sight of the
one who saw his [al-Mu'izz's] humbleness when
he received [the news from] the post-horse of the
defeated host,

And [the sight of] his prostration when his
forehead, his ornaments and the crown met the
sand of the earth!

The might of the caliphal title, the augustness, the
glory, his veneration and exaltation did not prevent
him [from that prostration]²⁶

That same year, the Fatimid court began preparations for a visit from a Byzantine ambassador. The terms of the truce were once more negotiated. The ambassador, whose name was recorded as Nicolas, was informed by the Imam-caliph that they would receive him again soon, but next time they would meet in Egypt.

Chapter 5

The Fatimid Venture in Egypt

On the Eve of a New Order

By the late 960s, Egypt was caught up in a cycle of disaster. An unfortunate combination of natural calamities and political crises between the remnants of the governing class of the Ikhshidids, the dynasty of governors who ruled on behalf of the Abbasids, led to a state of lawlessness and anarchy. Different factions of the Egyptian military fought each other for control of the shrinking resources. Those hoping for help from the Abbasid caliphs were disappointed, as the Abbasid state was enmeshed in crises of its own.

Yet during this period, the long-established Fatimid *da'wa* continued to expand. Abu Ja'far Ahmad b. Nasr was the leading Fatimid *da'i* in Egypt, and during the 960s he exerted much influence over the leading notables and merchants of the capital city, Fustat. Despite the factionalism racking the city, many wanted above all else to restore peace to their homeland. From Egypt, letters were sent to the Fatimid capital, al-Mansuriyya, inviting al-Mu'izz to extend his rule to Egypt.

It was a watershed moment, and by 966, on the orders of al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah, the momentous decision had been made and arrangements were underway to begin a new expedition to the lands of Egypt. More than 20 million dinars was spent on preparing the

expedition over the following two years, directed by the commander Jawhar al-Siqilli. On the long coastal road between the lands of Ifriqiya and Egypt that weaved through present-day Tunisia and Libya, major building projects were begun. At each stage of the road, new wells were dug and forts built. Throughout this time, al-Mu'izz met almost daily with Jawhar, as together they oversaw the expedition and discussed governance of the new land.

On 6 February 968, Jawhar set out at the head of a 100,000-strong Fatimid army. The entire Fatimid court, led by the Imam-caliph himself, came to send them off:

Al-Mu'izz stood close to Jawhar while he was on his horse, leaning towards him and speaking privately with him. Then al-Mu'izz turned to his sons and said, 'Bid farewell to Jawhar!' So they dismounted, and the people of the realm followed suit and bid him farewell.¹

The Fatimid Guarantee of Safety

In May 969, the Fatimid army entered Egypt and set up camp in the Nile Delta. From the capital of Fustat, a group of envoys chosen to represent Egyptian society came to meet the Fatimid general. They assembled to discuss the terms by which the Fatimids would rule the lands of the Nile. Amongst these envoys were the leading figures of Egypt, including the chief judge of Fustat, as well as the Fatimid *da'i* of Egypt who had been instrumental in securing support from local nobles. Leading the delegation was a distinguished figure, the *sharif* Abu Ja'far Muslim al-Husayni. The title *sharif* means 'lord', and in that period (and still used in North Africa today) referred to the descendants of the

Prophet. For the Egyptians, there could be none better to negotiate terms of entry of the Fatimids than this kinsman of the Fatimid caliphs.

Soon after the meeting, the inhabitants of Fustat gathered to greet the returning delegation. On his person, Sharif Abu Ja'far carried the *aman* (guarantee of safety), which was then read out to the people. The document had been written up and signed by Jawhar upon his meeting, with the Egyptian envoys with its terms previously stipulated by al-Mu'izz. It decreed the principles of government for the new polity that would arise along the Nile. Both Egyptian and Ismaili historians have preserved the entire document, which like the *Ahd* attributed to Imam Ali, noted above, expounded the duties incumbent on rulers.

The *aman* proclaimed the universal authority of the Fatimids as the sole legitimate Imam-caliphs of the Muslim world, and promised just rule for all Egyptians, Muslims, Christians and Jews. On behalf of al-Mu'izz, Jawhar pledged to restore peace and security across Egypt, to secure the pilgrimage routes against brigands, to reform the coinage and restore economic prosperity, to abolish unlawful taxes, to protect people's inheritance, to repair the mosques and pay regular salaries to their caretakers, and to adhere to the precedence (*sunna*) of the Prophet.

But amongst the document's most distinctive features was the commitment to tolerance and inclusivity. For the Sunni communities of Egypt who constituted the majority, the *aman* ensured that they could continue practising Islam according to their own traditions. Christians and Jews were also guaranteed protection. Having gathered to listen to the decree, the people

of Fustat heard Jawhar's rendering of Imam-caliph al-Mu'izz's pledge as read out by Sharif Abu Ja'far:

I guarantee you God's complete and universal safety, eternal and continuous, inclusive and perfect, renewed and confirmed through the days, and recurring through the years, for your lives, your property, your families, your livestock, your estates and your quarters, and whatever you possess – modest or significant. There shall be no opponent opposing you, no harasser harassing you and no pursuer pursuing you ...²

You shall continue in your *madhhab*. You shall be permitted to perform your obligations according to religious scholarship, and to gather for it in your congregational and other mosques, and to remain steadfast in the beliefs of the worthy ancestors from the Companions of the Prophet ... and those who succeeded them, the jurists of the cities who have pronounced judgements according to their *madhhabs* and *fatwas* ... The call to prayer and its performance, the fasting in the month of Ramadan, the breaking of the fast and the celebration of its nights, the [payment of] the alms tax, [the performance of the] pilgrimage and the undertaking of *jihad* will be maintained according to the command of God and His Book and in accordance with the instruction of His Prophet ... in his *sunna*, and the *dhimmis* [Christians and Jews] will be treated according to previous custom ... Blessings of God be upon our master Muhammad and his righteous, pure and best progeny.³

The Fatimid armies arrived in Fustat soon after. Despite brief skirmishes with the remnants of the old military factions, the conquest was complete.

Jawhar led the first Friday prayer in Fustat's congregational mosque. To symbolise the new order, the *khutba*

(sermon), which for more than a century had been pronounced in the name of the Abbasid caliph, was now invoked for the Fatimid Imam-caliph:

O God, bless Your servant and Your *wali* (friend), the fruit of prophecy, and the scion of the rightly-guiding and rightly-guided family, the servant of God, the Imam Ma'add Abu Tamim al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah, the Commander of the Faithful, as you have blessed his pure forefathers and descendants, the righteous imams.⁴

Soon thereafter, across the lands of Egypt, the following invocation was added to those announced during communal prayers:

O God, shower Your blessings on Muhammad, the chosen one, on Ali, the approved one, on Fatima, the pure, and on al-Hasan and al-Husayn, the two grandsons of the Prophet, from whom You have removed all impurity and have sanctified them.⁵

Before long, Fatimid coins minted in Egypt began circulating through Fustat's market stalls and through Egyptian society at large. Upon them were inscribed both the claim to sovereignty of the Fatimid Imam-caliph and the belief in Ali's succession to the Prophet Muhammad. On the front of the coin was inscribed:

The Imam Ma'add [issues a] summons to the Oneness of God, the Eternal.
Al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah, the Commander of the Faithful.
In the name of God, this dinar was minted in Egypt in 358 [968–9].

And on the back:

There is no god except God and Muhammad is the messenger of God.

God has sent him with guidance and the true religion to proclaim it over all other religions, despite the abhorrence of the polytheists.

Ali is the best of legates, the deputy of the best of the messengers.⁶

For the next four years, from 969 to 973, Jawhar ruled as governor of Egypt, until the time came to hand over the reins to the Imam-caliph. During that period, as ordered by his master, al-Mu'izz, Jawhar laid the groundwork for continued Fatimid rule in Egypt.

The Founding of Cairo

When Jawhar led the Fatimid army to the capital of Egypt, the people of Fustat, led by their nobles, came out to greet the general on the banks of the Nile. The white banners of the Fatimids already flew over the city. The Egyptians looked on as the army arrived, and watched as it crossed from the western to the eastern bank of the river.

But Jawhar and his men did not stop at Fustat. Instead, they turned northwards and set up camp a few miles to the north. Even though the sun had begun to set, the sound of digging soon filled the air. On that very first evening, the foundations of a new city were laid.

Initially, the city was called *al-Mansuriyya*, in honour of the existing Fatimid capital in Ifriqiya, where the Imam-caliph was still residing. Four years later, when al-Mu'izz arrived, it was given its new name, *al-Qahira al-Mu'izziya*, the City Victorious of al-Mu'izz. From then

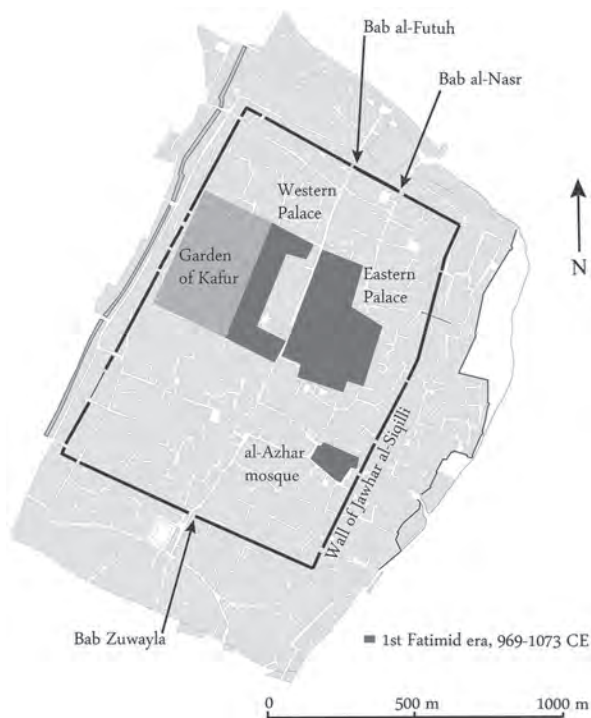


Figure 24. Cairo City Plan

An outline of the original walls and features of the newly founded Cairo, overlaid on a city-plan after its evolution. The canal (*khalij*) to the west, bringing water from the Nile, eventually disappeared as the city expanded. The main north-south thoroughfare of Fatimid Cairo is to this day called al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah Street.

until today, al-Qahira, Cairo, has stood as one of the great Islamic metropolises. Long after Cairo was first established as the capital of Egypt, historians would

continue to relate descriptions of the founding of the city, such as the one by Ibn Hawqal:

Cairo was founded by the scribe Jawhar for the Commander of the Faithful, al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah, and included shops, markets, baths, beautiful houses and lofty palaces within its confines, the likes of which no other city had. It also had a diwan [administrative bureau], a magnificent congregational mosque and cavalry, infantry and horses.⁷

Over the months and years that followed, Jawhar oversaw the construction of the city. Designed as a square grid, it reproduced many of the features of both al-Mahdiyya and al-Mansuriyya. The northern gate was named Bab al-Futuh and the southern gate Bab Zuwayla, following the northern and southern gates of al-Mansuriyya. The square that was located in between the palaces of the Fatimid Imam and his *wali al-'ahd* was called the Bayn al-Qasrayn, just as in al-Mahdiyya.

In the south-eastern quarter of Cairo, Jawhar laid the foundations of a new congregational mosque. In time, this became one of the most illustrious centres of learning and education in the Muslim world, a function that it continues to fulfil even now. The mosque was called *al-Azhar* (the Radiant), after its counterpart at al-Mahdiyya. The word itself derived from the common Arabic root shared by *al-Zahra*, which is among the epithets of Fatima, the Prophet's daughter. A plaque was placed upon the new mosque, marking its foundations, noting its patron, and invoking prayers upon him and his progeny: 'This building was ordered by the servant of God and his *wali* Abu Tamim Ma'add the Imam al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah, the Commander of the Faithful,

may God's prayer be upon him and his ancestors and his honourable progeny, by his servant Jawhar al-Katib al-Siqilli.⁸

Four more years would pass before the city became home of the Imam-caliph, and the new capital of the Fatimid realms. Cairo now awaited his arrival.

The Great Migration to Egypt

Al-Mansuriyya erupted in celebration when messengers brought news of Jawhar's entry into Egypt. Once more, the audience at the palace turned their ears to the court-poet Ibn Hani, who captured the occasion in verse:

The Abbasids say: 'Has Egypt been conquered?'

Say to the Abbasids: 'The matter has been ordained'...

For indeed, this world has turned in favour of the family of the Prophet.⁹

Soon, however, the people of the capital learned of a momentous turn concerning the Fatimid presence in Ifriqiya, the centre of Fatimid rule for just over 60 years. Now, in 969, word had it that, on the order of Imam-caliph al-Mu'izz li-Din Allah, the Fatimid venture would shift to the banks of the Nile and the Fatimid capital would be relocated to Egypt. With it would move the Imam-caliph, his family and his court, the leading families, the state administration with its officers and registries, including the treasury, and thousands of Kutama families.

The great transfer of the Fatimid capital was not without portents. In the works of the later Sunni biographer Ibn Khallikan (d. 1282), we read that the future career of a son of the most eminent man of the land was foretold.

Ibn Khallikan writes that, when al-Mu'izz was still in Ifriqiya,

He ordered the Qadi Abu Hanifa al-Nu'man to have an astrolabe made in silver, and to place a trustworthy person beside the workman [to stop the silver from being embezzled]. Al-Nu'man chose his son Muhammad for that purpose. When the astrolabe was finished, he took it to al-Mu'izz. 'Whom did you place beside the workmen?' said the amir [al-Mu'izz]. 'My son Muhammad' was the reply [from al-Nu'man]. 'He shall be the *qadi* of Egypt', exclaimed al-Mu'izz, and so it happened.¹⁰

In 969, preparations to transfer the capital of state began in earnest. It would take three full years. The capital city became a hive of activity. Thousands of horses and camels were brought in to carry the countless people and possessions and public items. Papers were prepared and issued to regulate the numbers who were moving to the east. The uploading of the treasury was witnessed by astonished bystanders:

[Al-Mu'izz] loaded all the treasures from the palaces onto the camels and had the dinars melted in the shape of millstones, placing two pieces on each camel. In the middle of each piece was a hole that was used to tie the pieces together. This so amazed the subjects that they stood in the streets to watch how the treasury was carried away.¹¹

It was 972 when the moment of transfer finally arrived. Al-Mu'izz had by now prepared the administration of the lands of Ifriqiya for his departure. Yusuf Buluggin b. Ziri, the son of a family long known for their devoted loyalty to the Fatimid Imam-caliphs,

was appointed viceroy to govern the land. His father, Ziri b. Manad, was chief of the Berber Sanhaja confederation. Although many of the Berber factions in North Africa had joined the rebellion of the Khariji Abu Yazid when it was in the ascendance some 30 years earlier, Ziri b. Manad had stayed firm in his loyalty to the Fatimid Imam-caliph al-Mansur. His Berber armies played a vital role in supporting al-Mansur in the final quelling of the rebellion. Ziri himself died in battle against anti-Fatimid rebels, and his status as chief of the Sanhaja was inherited by his son Yusuf Buluggin. As al-Maqrizi (d. 1442), the medieval historian of Egypt, writes, on the eve of his relocation al-Mu'izz summoned Buluggin to prepare the handover of power:

[Al-Mu'izz said to Yusuf] 'Prepare yourself for the succession of the Maghrib.' He expressed awe and responded, 'O master, you and your ancestors, the imams, are the descendants of the Prophet of God, may God bless him and grant him salvation, yet the Maghrib has not been untroubled for you. So how do you expect it [to be] if I am a Sanhaji Berber? O master, without a sword or a spear you have slayed me.' Al-Mu'izz persevered until Yusuf acceded to his request. He rejoined, 'O master, on the condition that you appoint the *qadis* and the tax collectors as you see fit, and that you choose and appoint informers whom you trust, and that you make me a leader over them. If someone disobeys them, let them give me authority over him [the offender] so that I should deal with him appropriately. The rule would be vested in them and I would serve it.'

This pleased al-Mu'izz, so he thanked Yusuf.¹²

Following the Imam-caliph's departure, Buluggin b. Ziri served as founder of a new dynasty of viceroys over

Ifriqiya. The Zirid dynasty, named after his father, would rule for more than 150 years. In the following centuries, offshoots of the dynasty would re-establish their dynastic rule in Ifriqiya and in Muslim Spain.

In August 972, al-Mu'izz began his migration to Egypt. Departing from al-Mansuriyya, he bade farewell to the capital city founded by his father. Following him in a great procession were his own extended family, from great-uncles and aunts to his own sons, including Nizar, who in due course was to be proclaimed the successor to al-Mu'izz, and first Fatimid Imam-caliph to begin his rule in Egypt. Among the entourage were Qadi al-Nu'man and his family, the chiefs of the Kutama, and al-Ustadh Jawdhar with his own retinue. The great journey to Egypt had begun, signalling the waning of Fatimid rule in the West and the dawn of the two-century age in Egypt.

Glossary

Abbasids	Major Muslim dynasty of Sunni caliphs who ruled from Baghdad (750–1258).
<i>ahl al-bayt</i>	Lit. 'People of the House'. In the Prophet's time, the term referred to the Banu Hashim and, associated with them, the Banu'l-Muttalib. After Muhammad's death, under the Umayyads, the term remained in circulation, with various interpretations, until it finally came to mean the progeny of Imam Ali and Fatima, the Prophet Muhammad's daughter.
Ali b. Abi Talib	Cousin of the Prophet, and his son-in-law by marriage to his daughter Fatima; first Shi'i Imam and fourth caliph (d. 661). His descendants became known as the Alids.
<i>aman</i>	Guarantee of safety usually issued upon the conquest of a city.
<i>Amir al-Mu'minin</i>	'Commander of the Faithful'. A title used by the Shi'a for Ali b. Abi Talib and by the Ismailis for the Fatimid Imams, and adopted more widely by Sunni caliphs.
<i>awliya Allah</i>	Lit. the 'Friends of God'. In Fatimid times, <i>awliya</i> referred to those who professed belief in the <i>da'wa</i> , in particular, the Kutama. The term could also be used in reference to the Imams themselves and, in Sufi traditions, to saints.
<i>batin</i>	The inner, or esoteric, meaning of a sacred text, ritual or religious prescription, often contrasted with <i>zahir</i> .
caliph	Leader of the Muslim community. By the 10th century, the Arabic <i>khalifa</i>

	meant a successor of the Prophet Muhammad and denoted temporal authority.
caliphate	The Muslim political institution or state centred around the caliph.
<i>da'i</i>	Lit. 'summoner' or 'inviter'. Can be approximated to 'missionary' and denotes an emissary or propagator of the faith; in the hierarchy of the Fatimid <i>da'wa</i> , it represents a specific rank.
<i>da'wa</i>	'Mission' or 'invitation' to Islam. Ismailis often referred to their movement as simply <i>al-da'wa</i> or <i>al-da'wa al-hadiya</i> (the rightly guided call).
<i>dawla</i>	A state or dynasty.
<i>dawlat al-haqq</i>	'The Righteous Reign'; the term the Fatimids used to describe their state.
<i>dawr al-satr</i>	Lit. 'Period of Concealment'. Refers to the century and a half during which the Ismaili Imams were hidden from public knowledge, and which ended with the appearance of Abd Allah al-Mahdi in 297/909.
Fatima	Daughter of the Prophet Muhammad (d. 632), wife of Ali b. Abi Talib and mother of al-Hasan and al-Husayn. All the Prophet's lineal descendants come through Fatima's children through marriage with Ali.
Fatimids	Major Muslim dynasty of Ismaili caliphs in North Africa (from 909) and later in Egypt (973–1171), who claimed descent from the Prophet Muhammad through Ali and derived their name from the Prophet's daughter Fatima.
Fustat	The first Muslim city in Egypt, which was eventually absorbed into Cairo after the latter's foundation in 969.
Hijaz	The north-western region of the Arabian Peninsula and home to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina.
<i>al-hijra</i>	The 'emigration' from Mecca to Medina as led by the Prophet Muhammad in the year 622. The Muslim calendar starts

	from this year and is therefore <i>anno hegirae</i> (AH).
<i>hujja</i>	Lit. 'proof'. Shi'i literature uses the term to denote various signs or witnesses to God. The term was applied to a number of key figures in Ismaili thought: the authoritative interpreters of the revelation of God, that is, the Imams; and as a reference to the chief <i>da'i</i> . The <i>hujja</i> was also a high rank in the Fatimid <i>da'wa</i> .
Ifriqiya	The region that today comprises Tunisia and part of eastern Algeria, where the Fatimids first established their rule.
<i>ilm</i>	Knowledge. In Shi'i doctrine, every Imam possesses special knowledge (<i>ilm</i>), which is transmitted to him through <i>nass</i> .
Imam	Generally used to denote a leader, whether a prayer-leader or caliph. In Shi'i Islam, it refers to the designated Imams from the <i>ahl al-bayt</i> .
imamate	The institution of authoritative political and religious leadership, which in Shi'i Islam refers to the designated Imams from the Household of the Prophet.
Ismailis	Adherents of a branch of Shi'i Islam following the line of Isma'il, the eldest son of the Shi'i Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (d. 765), from whom the Fatimid Imams claimed descent.
<i>Ithna'ashari</i>	Lit. 'Twelvers', the majority branch of Shi'i Muslims, who acknowledge 12 Imams in lineal succession from Ali b. Abi Talib. After Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (d. 765), they acknowledged his younger son, Musa al-Kazim, as their Imam.
Kutama	A significant Berber clan of the Sanhaja confederation of tribes. They served as the backbone of the Fatimid state in North Africa.
Maghrib	North Africa (present-day Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia).
<i>mahdi</i>	Lit. the 'Rightly Guided One', a term applied in Muslim eschatology to one who

	is the restorer of true religion and justice before the end of time. In Shi'a Islam, the <i>Mahdi</i> referred to a messianic Imam.
Mahdiyya	A coastal town in modern-day Tunisia, founded by the first Fatimid Imam-caliph, al-Mahdi bi'llah.
<i>majlis</i> pl. <i>majalis</i>	Lit. 'seating' or 'gathering'. As used by the Ismaili <i>da'wa</i> , the term <i>majalis al-hikma</i> denoted the sessions where the believers received instruction on Ismaili doctrine.
<i>mazalim</i>	The <i>mazalim</i> courts functioned as an appeals court, where decisions made by <i>qadis</i> (judges) could be reconsidered, and complaints against a local tax collector, a regional governor, a commander or even the caliph himself could be heard.
<i>nass</i>	Lit. 'text' or 'stipulation'. In Shi'i Islam, it refers to Prophet Muhammad's declaration of Ali as his successor, and by extension, to the requirement that each Imam should explicitly appoint the following Imam. The concept of <i>nass</i> was developed in the early decades of Shi'i Islam, when several people claimed the imamate for themselves, especially in the times of Imams Muhammad al-Baqir and Ja'far al-Sadiq.
<i>qadi</i>	Muslim judge.
Qahira	Cairo; city founded by the Fatimids in 969. It was named <i>al-Qahira al-Mu'izziya</i> ('The Victorious City of al-Mu'izz') when al-Mu'izz took up residence there in 973.
Qaramita	An early Islamic revolutionary movement following Hamdan Qarmat which, while adhering with the Ismailis to the imamate of Isma'il b. Ja'far, opposed the imamate of al-Mahdi bi'llah and the successive Fatimid Imams.
Qayrawan	Tunisian city and the first Fatimid capital in 909; present-day Kairouan.

<i>sharif</i> pl. <i>ashraf</i>	Descendants of the Prophet, through Ali and Fatima.
Sijilmasa	A town in south-east Morocco; a rich trading city during the Fatimid era.
Sind	The lower valley and delta of the Indus river.
<i>tiraz</i>	Inscribed textiles given by the rulers as gifts to honour those who had served the state.
Umayyads	First major ruling dynasty of Muslim history, based in Damascus (632–750); their successors ruled Andalusia in Spain.
<i>walaya</i>	Lit. 'authority' or 'guardianship'. A principal belief of Shi'i Islam, linked closely to imamate, denoting devotion and obedience to the <i>ahl al-bayt</i> and acknowledgement of the Imam's right to succeed the Prophet Muhammad.
<i>wali</i> pl. <i>awliya</i>	Lit. 'friend'. In particular, Friend of God (see <i>awliya</i>).
<i>wali al-ahd</i>	Heir apparent.
<i>wasi</i> pl. <i>awsiya</i>	'Legatee'. The Shi'a consider Ali b. Abi Talib as the 'legatee' or successor of the Prophet, i.e. the inheritor of the Prophet's spiritual and temporal authority, which passed on to his successive Imams.
<i>zahir</i>	The outward, apparent or exoteric, meaning of a sacred text, ritual or religious prescription, from which the <i>batin</i> is deduced.

Notes

Chapter 1. The Origins

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- 3 *Sirat Ja'far*, in Halm, *Empire*, p. 135.
- 4 Al-Nu'man, *Founding the Fatimid State*, pp. 204–5.
- 5 Al-Nu'man, *Founding the Fatimid State*, p. 205.
- 6 Al-Nu'man, *Founding the Fatimid State*, p. 208.

Chapter 2. Towards a Mediterranean Empire

- 1 Al-Nu'man, *Founding the Fatimid State*, pp. 205–8.
- 2 Al-Nu'man, *Founding the Fatimid State*, p. 213.
- 3 Al-Jawdhari, *Sirat al-Ustadh Jawdhar*, ed. and trans. Hamid Haji as *Inside the Immaculate Portal: A History from the Early Fatimid Archives* (London, 2012), p. 22.
- 4 Ibn Hammad, *Akhbar*, as cited in Halm, *The Empire of the Mahdi*, p. 173.
- 5 Idris Imad al-Din, *Uyun al-akhbar*, trans. Shainool Jiwa in *An Anthology of Ismaili Literature: A Shi'i Vision of Islam*, ed. Hermann Landolt, Samira Sheikh and Kutub Kassam (London, 2008), pp. 49–66, on p. 61.
- 6 Paul E. Walker, ed. and tr., *Orations of the Fatimid Caliphs: Festival Sermons of the Ismaili Imams* (London, 2009), p. 90.
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- 12 Halm, *The Empire of the Mahdi*, p. 276.

Chapter 3. The Fatimid State in Transition

- 1 Al-Jawdhari, *Immaculate Portal*, pp. 27–8.
- 2 Walker, *Orations of the Fatimid Caliphs*, pp. 93–4.
- 3 Halm, *The Empire of the Mahdi*, p. 310.
- 4 Halm, *The Empire of the Mahdi*, p. 312.
- 5 Halm, *The Empire of the Mahdi*, p. 312.
- 6 Walker, *Orations of the Fatimid Caliphs*, p. 100 (translation slightly modified).
- 7 Halm, *The Empire of the Mahdi*, pp. 325–6.
- 8 Halm, *The Empire of the Mahdi*, pp. 326–7.
- 9 Halm, *The Empire of the Mahdi*, p. 341.
- 10 Halm, *The Empire of the Mahdi*, p. 341.
- 11 Idris Imad al-Din, *Uyun al-akhbar*, trans. Shainool Jiwa as *The Founder of Cairo: The Fatimid Caliph-Imam al-Mu'izz and his Era* (London, 2013), p. 82.
- 12 Idris, *Founder of Cairo*, p. 56.
- 13 Halm, *The Empire of the Mahdi*, p. 366.
- 14 Idris, *Founder of Cairo*, p. 66.

Chapter 4. The Making of an Empire

- 1 Idris, *Founder of Cairo*, pp. 72–3.
- 2 Idris, *Founder of Cairo*, pp. 74–5.
- 3 Al-Jawdhari, *Immaculate Portal*, p. 42.
- 4 Idris, *Founder of Cairo*, p. 92.
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- 25 Idris, *Founder of Cairo*, p. 182.
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Chapter 5. The Fatimid Venture in Egypt

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- 2 Al-Maqrizi, *Towards a Shi'i Mediterranean Empire*, pp. 68–72.
- 3 Idris, *Founder of Cairo*, pp. 208–13.
- 4 Al-Maqrizi, *Towards a Shi'i Mediterranean Empire*, p. 81.
- 5 Al-Maqrizi, *Towards a Shi'i Mediterranean Empire*, pp. 83–4.
- 6 Al-Maqrizi, *Towards a Shi'i Mediterranean Empire*, p. 82.
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- 8 Al-Maqrizi, *al-Mawa'iz wa'l-itibar fi dhikr al-khitat wa'l-athar*, ed. M. Zaynhum and Madihat al-Sharqawi (Cairo, 1998), pp. 213–17.
- 9 Idris, *Founder of Cairo*, pp. 223–4.
- 10 Ibn Khallikan, *Wafayat al-Ayan*, trans. M. de Slane, *Biographical Dictionary* (Paris, 1842–71), vol. 3, pp. 570–1.
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Further Reading

There is a growing body of literature providing a survey of Fatimid history and thought. Principal among these is the comprehensive summary in Farhad Daftary's *The Isma'ilis: Their History and Doctrines* (2nd edition, Cambridge, 2007), pp. 137–295. Similarly, Paul E. Walker's study *Exploring an Islamic Empire: Fatimid History and its Sources* (London, 2002), pp. 15–91, provides an insightful overview of the Fatimids, along with a bibliography. Marius Canard's entry on the Fatimids in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (2nd edition) as well as Paula Sanders' 'The Fatimid State, 969–1171', in *The Cambridge History of Egypt*, volume 1: *Islamic Egypt, 640–1517*, ed. Carl F. Petry (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 151–174, also offer useful coverage of the Fatimids.

For more detailed accounts of the Fatimids, there are the three volumes by Heinz Halm (in German). The first volume, *Das Reich des Mahdi: Der Aufstieg der Fatimiden* (Munich, 1991), covers the Ifriqiyan phase of Fatimid history, and has been translated into English by Michael Bonner as *The Empire of the Mahdi: The Rise of the Fatimids* (Leiden, 1996). Halm's second volume, *Die Kalifen von Kairo: Die Fatimiden in Ägypten 973–1074* (Munich, 2003), and third volume, *Kalifen und Assassinen: Ägypten und der Vordere Orient zur Zeit der ersten Kreuzzüge 1074–1171* (Munich, 2014), cover the Egyptian phase of Fatimid history. The second and third volumes are yet to be translated. For another important overview of Fatimid history, see Michael Brett, *The Fatimid Empire* (Edinburgh, 2017). On the North African phase of Fatimid history, see his *The Rise of the Fatimids: The World of the Mediterranean and the Middle East in the Fourth Century of the Hijra, Tenth Century CE* (Leiden, 2001), as well as Farhat Dachraoui's *Le Califat Fatimid au Maghrib, 296–362/909–973: histoire, politique et institutions* (Tunis, 1981). Among the important contemporary works in Arabic surveying the Egyptian phase of Fatimid history is Ayman Fu'ad

Sayyid's *Al-Dawla al-Fatimiyya fi Misr: tafsir jadid* (2nd edition, Cairo, 2000).

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Note on the Text

In the interest of readability, notes have been kept to a minimum, with primary-source quotes referenced in the endnotes. Similarly, diacritics for transliterated words have been limited to the *ayn* (') and the *hamza* (') where they occur in the middle of a word. All dates are Common Era, unless otherwise indicated. Supplementary material related to the content of the book is available on the IIS website: www.iis.ac.uk.

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